

# **PRINCIPAL PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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## **PRINCIPAL PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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This case study research sought to understand the professional development perceptions and experiences of the principals from the researcher's school district. The document explains the federal and state legislation regarding professional development and the variety of frameworks for evaluating the effectiveness of professional development experiences. Specifically, the following research questions were investigated in the study: What do principals identify as important characteristics of professional learning? How do principals describe the relationship between important characteristics of professional learning and their experience in a district-provided professional development program? And how do principals view the impact of their professional development experiences on their professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice? Administrators from the school district were interviewed about their perceptions of and experiences with professional learning. The findings from the study informed the researcher about the professional development perceptions and experiences of the principals and administrators in the district. The findings may also potentially inform central office administrators and those responsible for providing professional development for school principals and may further add to the literature on the topic.

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## **PREFACE**

Writing a dissertation has been a challenging and seemingly never-ending experience yet one that has also been incredibly rewarding. As I near the end of this phase of my educational journey, I am thankful to have the opportunity to recognize all of the family, friends, colleagues, and mentors who have supported me throughout the process.

To the most important people in my life, Lew, Gage, and Ansley, I am grateful each and every day for you. I never laugh harder or feel more love and joy than when we are together. I'm sure you don't remember a time when I was not attending class, working on school assignments, or talking about my dissertation. Throughout the process you have never complained, even when it meant I was not available or missed an event of yours. That alone helped me to persist when it often seemed easier to quit. I hope I have modeled the importance of setting a goal and persevering through its completion. I promise to always support and encourage each of you in your pursuits as unselfishly as you have supported me.

I am also thankful to not only have a supportive family but to also be an administrator in a school district where professional learning and growth is valued. Throughout this process, I have received ongoing support and encouragement from the Board of Education, Administration, Faculty, and Staff of the Norwin School District. To Dr. Kerr, you have served as a role model and mentor and have continually reminded me that I am capable of passing the perseverance test of the dissertation. To the principals and administrators who participated in the study, I cannot

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To the strong, intelligent, dedicated school leaders I have been blessed to have as mentors and friends along my professional journey, Janet, Mary Anne, Tracy, and Rose, I am so appreciative of your example and ongoing encouragement to pursue my doctoral degree. To Connie, my colleague and friend, you have provided timely and relevant advice and feedback and have never let me get away with a misplaced which or that. And to Beverly, my right, and sometimes left, hand, you have been interested in and supportive of this process every step of the way. I am grateful to have you as a colleague and friend, and I thank you for always celebrating my success.

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Writing a dissertation has helped me grow as both a student and as a practitioner. I am blessed by the love and support I have received from family, friends, colleagues, and mentors throughout this process. You all have helped to make this experience manageable, valuable, and enjoyable.

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Federal educational legislation beginning with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 has recognized the importance of professional learning by including the expectation of professional development for educators. As noted in ESEA, recommendations were included to, “provide for the training of State and local educational personnel” (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965, p. 17). Prior to ESEA, professional development was not documented as a strategy for school improvement. Over the course of the fifty years since the initial passage of ESEA, subsequent federal and state legislative resolutions, including several reauthorizations of ESEA, have acknowledged its importance by further defining and significantly expanding requirements for professional development.

Following changing federal legislation, many states including Pennsylvania expanded their own requirements regarding professional development for teachers and school administrators. While all Pennsylvania educators were responsible for earning professional learning credit hours through Act 48 of 1999, school administrators became additionally responsible for professional development requirements through Pennsylvania Act 45 of 2007. Within Act 45 of 2007 are several requirements applicable to public and private school leaders in Pennsylvania, including the provision of continuing professional education for school or system leaders specifically focused on the Pennsylvania school leadership standards. The Act established a tiered certification process for principals, vice principals, and assistant principals,

and it supplements earlier legislation requiring school leaders to earn professional development credit hours through Act 48 credit hours (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.-b). Given the evolving legislation outlining requirements for professional development for school leaders, it is a topic worthy of greater exploration through research. As explained in subsequent sections, the purpose of this study is to understand professional development for principals from the perspective of the participants.

## **1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Participation in effective professional development is necessary for the growth of high quality instructional leaders who will positively impact teaching and learning (Council of Chief State of School Officers, 2008). As principals strive to meet the changing demands of their district and state and federal government, professional learning will prepare and support both individuals and school systems. There are a host of options available to meet the professional development requirements and needs of principals. One of the primary responsibilities of central office administrators is to plan and provide professional development for the building administrators in the District. In order to plan and provide effective professional learning experiences for principals, it is valuable to understand how they experience professional development. Recent legislative updates about professional development recognize that educators are integral to the determination of what professional development is relevant and necessary, based on local student needs and an obligation to demonstrate continuous growth and improvement (Learning Forward, n.d.).

This study seeks to understand professional development from the perspective of school principal participants. Thus, the study considers the participants' perceptions and experiences in professional learning and also considers the perspective of the central office administrators responsible for facilitating the program. The findings may potentially inform the researcher, the school district, and other school administrators responsible for planning and providing professional development for all principals.

## **1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The purpose of this research study is to understand the perceptions and experiences of one school district's principals related to their professional learning. Specifically, the following research questions frame the study:

- Q1. What do principals identify as important characteristics of professional learning?
- Q2. How do principals describe the relationship between important characteristics of professional learning and their professional development experiences?
- Q3. How do principals view the impact of their professional development experiences on their professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice?

## **1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The research study is significant to the researcher based on the researcher's background and experience in education, particularly with professional learning. In addition, given the ever-changing requirements and expectations for professional development for educators, the study is relevant to the field of education and educational practice.

### **1.3.1 Personal Significance**

I cannot remember a time when I have not been a student. My recollection of time and events is often correlated directly to the professional position which I hold or to the degree or certification which I pursue. Throughout my educational experience, I have served as a teacher, mathematics specialist, and elementary school principal. I currently serve as an Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education. I have similarly earned degrees and certifications including a Bachelor of Science in Education with a Mathematics Concentration, Master of Science in Education, K-12 Principal Certification, and a Superintendent Letter of Eligibility. With each new position and/or educational milestone, I have experienced a similar process – one in which a comprehensive combination of coursework and experiences prepare me for a new position. Upon commencing the new position, almost immediately I would recognize that, while coursework prepared me to qualify for the new position, there was still much to learn and experience in order to be successful in the role. I have relied on ongoing professional learning and experiences, both required and optional, to help me be fully competent as an educator.

Throughout my professional learning, I have experienced a wide variety of professional development experiences. Some of the experiences have been enormously helpful and some

have been what I considered less than applicable. In my current position as the Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education, I am responsible not only for my own professional learning, but for guiding and providing much of the professional learning for the district principals. Given the high expectations and limited opportunities for professional learning, it is important for me to identify and understand how principals experience professional learning so I can provide a high quality, relevant learning experience. As has been my experience, by continuing my own professional learning through the process of researching this topic, I may come to know more that will help me to be successful in my current position. Through this study, I want to understand professional learning from the perspective of the participants in the district in which I am employed. I will potentially use the information in several ways: to plan future professional development for principals in my district, to inform other central office administrators responsible for planning and providing professional development for principals, and to contribute to the body of literature on professional development for principals.

### **1.3.2 Significance to Scholarship and Practice**

In the current educational environment of standards and accountability, success as a building principal is often defined by the success of the building's students and teachers, based on student growth and achievement data. School leadership impacts student achievement more than any other single factor, second only to the effect of the classroom teacher (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013). Professional development is important in supporting the acquisition of skills and competencies which will enable a principal to improve student achievement.

In a subsequent chapter, an historical perspective of professional development as outlined through evolving federal and state guidelines will be presented. Professional learning and professional development recommendations specific to adult educators will be investigated. Frameworks which guide an understanding of the components, processes, and outcomes of professional development will be considered in order to identify the core features of professional learning. Based on the understandings gleaned from reviewing relevant literature and by conducting a pilot study, the researcher plans to investigate the professional development experiences of one district's principals. A comprehensive study of the participants will yield information to more fully understand the perceptions and experiences of principals with professional learning.

Soon after the inception of Act 45 of 2007, a researcher studied the professional development needs of southwestern Pennsylvania secondary principals. The study generated findings relevant to the participants' experiences and preferences in professional learning situations. Principals expressed a desire to participate in collaborative professional learning experiences and described several examples which they felt were effective (Bischel, 2008). Based on the study, the researcher suggested, "A district level administrator with principal input would be responsible for determining different professional development options and opportunities for principals. These opportunities would align with and support the same goals as the professional development for teachers" (Bischel, 2008, p. 127). The study also suggested areas of future exploration including the need to consider a principal's perception of professional development needs and experiences in order to plan relevant learning experiences for them and examples of principal professional development is occurring within school districts (Bischel, 2008). The findings from the study of the professional development experiences of one district's

principals may begin to address the suggestions identified in previous professional development literature such as the study referenced above.

#### **1.4 DEFINITION OF TERMS**

In the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965, professional development was referenced as training for education personnel (ESEA, 1965). The concept of professional development has evolved and has been more specifically defined within each subsequent iteration of education legislation. As one representative example, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 defines the term “professional development” as: a continuous process; aligned to state and local standards and goals; focused on student and educator learning needs as identified through district data; including coherent curriculum and evidence-based instruction; and evaluated based on its impact on student learning (NCLB, 2002). Currently, posted on the United States Department of Education website [Section 9101 (34)] is a 551-word definition of professional development, outlining expectations for all aspects of professional development for educators and schools. The focus on professional learning has led to more clearly defined definitions of professional development for educators.

A common understanding of professional development and other terms related to professional learning are necessary for a research study on professional development of principals. The following terms and operational definitions will be used throughout this research study:

**Professional Development** – Professional development, also referred to as professional learning, is defined as a comprehensive process of acquiring skills and knowledge for the purpose of impacting the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009).

**Central Office Administrator** – A central office administrator (Superintendent or Assistant Superintendent) is one who has responsibility for district tasks including the provision of professional development for building administrators, faculty, and staff.

**Building Administrator** – A building administrator is either a principal or assistant principal in one or more of the district’s schools.

**Core Features of Professional Development** – The five core features of professional development are identified as content, focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation. The presence of the core features of professional development, rather than the structure or type of professional learning activities, is related to participant learning (Desimone, 2009).

**Content Focus** – Content focus is the subject matter content of professional development including relevant knowledge, skills, and practices.

**Active Learning** – Active learning includes participant engagement in professional development activities, rather than a passive transmission of information.

**Coherence** – Coherence refers to the level of consistency between the professional development and the participant and/or relevant federal, state, and local initiatives.

**Duration** – The duration of professional development includes the length of time and amount (number of hours) of professional development learning.

**Collective Participation** – The interaction between and among participants throughout professional development, rather than learning which occurs in isolation, is referred to as collective participation.

## **2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Through a review of literature, several areas were investigated in order to inform a research study on professional development experienced by principals. Professional development, originally included as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, has been included in each reauthorization of federal education legislation including most recently the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. In ESSA, professional development was promoted through this statement: “Educator learning is an integral local strategy for building educator capacity to help students succeed with high academic standards” (Learning Forward, n.d.). The evolving recommendations for professional learning support the relevance of investigating the effectiveness of professional development for educators, and specifically for principals.

Recent legislation has reinforced the importance of providing educators opportunities to learn and improve their practice in order to improve student achievement. Professional development for educators provides the content and opportunity necessary for professional learning. As professional learning is learning specific to adult educators, it is important to consider research that has made recommendations for adult learning practices. In addition to the exploration of principles of adult learning, learning strategies specific to educators will be explored.

Several conceptual frameworks have been used to investigate professional development. In order to study professional development, it is necessary to understand frameworks which have been used for this purpose. A summary of relevant conceptual frameworks will be provided along with an in-depth discussion of one framework which will be used to frame this research study of a professional learning and a professional development program experienced in one school district.

The identified conceptual framework recommends five core features necessary in professional development. Literature includes an abundance of recommendations for the characteristics or features of effective professional development for educators. Citing correlational, quasi-experimental, and experimental studies, Desimone (2009) contends there are specific features of professional development which merit evaluation. The core features include content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, collective participation. She further contends, "Given the number, quality, and diversity of studies that provide support for the features, I conclude we have reached a consensus that these core features play an important role in determining the effectiveness of professional development," (p. 183). Desimone's core features are based on studies of teacher professional development. While there have been several studies that have investigated principal professional learning and development programs, there has been no consensus on the important features for principals. The literature provides insight into the expectations and effectiveness of professional learning for all educators, including teachers and principals. Thus, the ideas from Desimone's (2009) conceptual framework will be used as the foundation for a study of principal professional development.

## **2.1 THE INFLUENCE OF FEDERAL AND STATE LEGISLATION ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR EDUCATORS SINCE 1965**

Federal and state legislation has acknowledged the importance of professional learning by including the requirements for the professional development for educators. As noted in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, recommendations were included to, “Provide for the training of State and local educational personnel” (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965, p. 17). This was the first documented recommendation for the provision of professional development as a strategy for school improvement. Over the course of the fifty years since the initial passage of ESEA, several subsequent federal and state legislative decisions have recognized the significance of professional learning by further defining and significantly expanding requirements for professional development for educators.

The evolution of professional development evolution has created additional responsibility for local districts to implement the government mandates by providing access to appropriate professional development and for monitoring both the completion and effectiveness of experiences. An historical perspective of professional development is necessary to fully understand the significant changes which have impacted professional development practices in education.

### **2.1.1 The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965**

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 (P. L. 89-10) is recognized as the most expansive federal education bill ever enacted (Michelman, 2012; Thomas & Brady, 2005). The goal of ESEA was to strengthen and improve education in the Nation’s elementary and

secondary schools. This legislation was significant as it marked the first federal attempt to provide direction and support to state and local education agencies to improve teacher and school leader performance. Identifying the need for training for state and local educational personnel, along with opportunities for teacher improvement courses, the legislation marked the beginning of an ongoing process to improve our schools by providing training and education to the teachers and principals who lead them. Despite substantial increases in federal education funding, no significant changes or improvements were made to strengthen ESEA for several years following its inception. It was not until nearly 20 years later during President Ronald Reagan's administration that federal support of education was reformed.

### **2.1.2 A Nation at Risk**

With support from President Ronald Reagan, Secretary of Education Terrell H. Bell, created the National Commission on Excellence in Education to examine and report on the condition of education in the United States in *A Nation at Risk* (1983). The Commission made several overarching recommendations to improve teaching and learning. One important recommendation included Recommendation E, Leadership and Fiscal Support, which included recommendations for educators and elected officials to provide leadership and for citizens to provide fiscal support and stability necessary for reform (*A Nation at Risk*, 1983).

Recommendation E included recommendations about the role of professional development for school leaders to enable them to carry out the proposed reforms successfully. The Commission cited necessary leadership skills believed to be connected to improved teaching and learning. These included interpersonal and community relationships, goal-setting,

management, and supervision. Principals and superintendents were tasked with leading the reform efforts, while school boards were challenged to provide to leaders the professional development and support that would enable them to be effective (A Nation at Risk, 1983)

### **2.1.3 Goals 2000 Educate America Act**

Following the concerns raised in A Nation at Risk came an education plan to prepare schools for the 21st Century under President Clinton's leadership. Goals 2000 outlined the eight National Education Goals including one goal focused specifically on professional development:

By the year 2000, the Nation's teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century (Earley, 1994).

There were four objectives included as part of Goal 4, Teacher Education and Professional Development. As presented in Earley (1994), the objectives of the goal included:

(i) access for teachers to pre-service education and professional development focused on meeting the diverse educational, social, and health-related needs of students;

(ii) opportunities for professional learning about rigorous subject matter, instructional strategies, assessment, and technology;

(iii) strategies to attract and retain educators, and supports for the professional growth of teachers, administrators, and other educators; and

(iv) partnerships "among local educational agencies, institutions of higher education, parents, and local labor, business and professional associations to provide and support programs for the professional development of educators" (p. 4).

Goals 2000 was described as comprehensive legislation with strong bi-partisan support that would effectively transform the United States from “a nation at risk to a nation on the move” (Earley, 1994, p. 2).

#### **2.1.4 Improving America’s Schools Act 1994**

Almost concurrently with Goals 2000 and 30 years after the initial ESEA of 1965, the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act - also referred to as the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 (IASA) - was enacted. The Act was based on four key principles of comprehensive education reform: high academic standards for students, training for educators, flexibility of efforts and accountability for results, and quality parent-school-community partnerships. Several professional development recommendations for teachers, principals, and other school staff were included in the reauthorization, including recommendations for professional development that is ongoing, rigorous, and aligned to state standards, with the intention that the professional learning is assimilated into daily teaching and learning (Riley, 1995). A new program, the Eisenhower Professional Development Program, now known as Title II, was introduced as a vehicle through which all school personnel would have access to high-quality professional development. Specifically, the program recommended that educators have input in determining ideal professional development opportunities (United States Department of Education, n.d.-c). Further, the program suggested that educators and educational agencies would have the capability to create institutes, networks, or clearinghouses to support professional learning (Riley, 1995). A new Title I program would supplement Title II by framing strategies for effective professional development. The intention of IASA was to

promote a systematic approach to improving school achievement that would replace previous isolated, fragmented efforts (Riley, 1995).

With each subsequent legislative decision, the requirements for professional development were more specifically and clearly defined. Increased emphasis on and expectations for professional learning became progressively evident. After nearly 30 years of federal influence on the professional expectations for educators, the first legislation of its kind in the state of Pennsylvania was enacted.

### **2.1.5 Pennsylvania Act 48 of 1999**

Beginning July 1, 2000, continuing education requirements for Pennsylvania educators were defined through Act 48. Act 48 required all educators to complete 180 hours of professional development during every five year period to maintain an active teaching certificate. This legislation impacted all Pennsylvania educators, considered the unique needs of educators across all phases of a professional career, and was based on the principles of adult learning. Suggested content of effective professional development was defined as the knowledge and skills to improve teaching, learning, decision-making, and collaboration (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.-a).

A separate set of recommended goals was listed, specifically for those educators serving in or seeking leadership roles at the school or district level. The four goals included ideas which would later become part of the Pennsylvania Core Leadership Standards. Leadership learning was defined as learning which should help educators to think and plan strategically, ensuring alignment of curriculum and instruction to Pennsylvania's academic standards. It should enable

leaders to effectively access and use student data effectively, create a culture of teaching and learning, and manage resources (Pennsylvania School Leadership Evaluation Tool, 2010).

Throughout the last decades of the 20th century, federal and state reform efforts in education were occurring with increasing regularity. With the transition to the 21st Century came The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, described as “arguably the most far reaching education policy initiative in the United States over the last four decades,” (Dee & Jacob, 2010).

### **2.1.6 No Child Left Behind Act of 2001**

Public Law 107-110, also commonly referred to as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), proposed, “To close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” (NCLB, 2002). This simple statement represented significant reformation of the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Dee & Jacob, 2010).

NCLB presented specific recommendations for professional development activities and programs for teachers, principals, and when appropriate, paraprofessionals. Instructional topics included knowledge of core academic subjects, effective instructional strategies, state academic standards, and state assessments (NCLB, 2002). Additionally, within NCLB (2002), professional development training was recommended in areas including behavior management and modification, and parent communication and relations. Included were expectations for training to meet the needs of students with disabilities, students with special learning needs (including those identified as gifted and talented), and students with limited English proficiency. Evident was an emphasis on innovative professional development programs to train teachers and

principals to utilize technology effectively to improve instruction, learning, and technology literacy (NCLB, 2002).

The unique needs of educators at different points in their careers was recognized and a specific induction program to support educators during their first three years was recommended. The No Child Left Behind Act signaled a pivotal change in the educational climate. Increased expectations and accountability for teaching and learning became the norm, and professional development was one of the many areas impacted by this legislation.

### **2.1.7 Pennsylvania Act 45 of 2007**

Following federal NCLB legislation, many states including Pennsylvania expanded their own requirements regarding professional development for teachers and school leaders. While all Pennsylvania educators were made responsible for earning professional learning credit hours through Act 48 of 1999, school administrators became additionally responsible for professional development requirements through subsequent legislation: Pennsylvania Act 45 of 2007. Within Act 45 of 2007 are several requirements applicable to public and private schools in Pennsylvania, including the provision of continuing professional education for school or system leaders specifically focused on the Pennsylvania school leadership standards. The Act established a tiered certification process for principals, vice principals, and assistant principals, and it supplements earlier legislation requiring school leaders to earn professional development credit hours through Act 48 credit hours (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.-b).

Core and corollary standards underpin all of the professional education programs for both new and experienced school leaders in Pennsylvania (Region 2 Intermediate Units, n.d). The Pennsylvania Department of Education organized its professional education offerings for school

leaders through their Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership (PIL) program. The PIL curriculum is based on curriculum from two other recognized associations – the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) and the Pennsylvania School Leadership Council (PLDC). PIL-approved courses and programs are the only professional development opportunities that satisfy the certification requirements for Pennsylvania school leaders (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.-b).

According to Act 45, individuals earning certification after January 1, 2008, are issued an Administrative I certificate and are required to complete an induction program within five years of appointment to their position. Following three years of satisfactory service and evidence of completion of an approved induction program, administrators are eligible for an Administrative II certificate. The purpose of the induction program is to assist administrators in learning the three core school leadership standards. New principals are required to accumulate a maximum of 36 hours per school year and a total of 108 hours over a three year period. Specific courses have been identified as the basis of the Principal Induction Program. The table below outlines the program expectations.

**Table 1.** Principal Induction Program

<b>Course One: World Class Schooling – Vision and Goals</b>	
Unit 1	The Educational Challenge
Unit 2	The Principal as Strategic Thinker
Unit 3	The Elements of Standards-Based Instructional Systems
Unit 4	Foundations of Effective Learning
<b>Course Four: Driving for Results</b>	
Unit 11	The Principal as Driver of Change
Unit 12	Leading for Results
Unit 13	Culminating Simulation

New principals can earn a total of 90 hours for their participation in Course One: World Class Schooling – Vision and Goals. The four units of Course One are focused on visionary and strategic leadership, standards-based teaching and learning, and high quality curriculum and instruction. Additionally, participants may earn 60 hours for the completion of Course Four: Driving for Results. The three units of Course Four focus on goal-setting and data-based decision-making. The courses offer a variety of learning experiences through readings, discussions, simulations, and reflection activities to help new principals learn these relevant leadership concepts.

In addition to the induction courses for new principals, there are standards-based PIL courses designed specifically to meet the needs of experienced principals. Experienced principals are required to earn 180 hours of professional development within each compliance period. A compliance period is typically five years; however, given the changing expectations of principal professional development, the most recent compliance period was extended by two years.

Act 45 of 2007 was significant to Pennsylvania school leaders as it was the first time that specific requirements for principals and central office administrators were outlined. As explained by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, “This legislation will make better use of Act 48 credits by requiring certain school administrators to participate in professional education activities that are focused on practices that have the greatest impact on improving student achievement” (n.d.). Future legislation similarly recognized the professional development needs of teachers and school leaders.

### **2.1.8 A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act**

In 2010, three years after reauthorization of the ESEA was due, President Obama and Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, published *A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. As outlined in the *Blueprint for Reform*, there were key differences between this document and former legislation. The *Blueprint* built on previous reauthorizations by focusing on the need for educators to receive meaningful information about their practice and use the information to provide effective instruction for students (United States Department of Education, 2010). In direct contrast to NCLB, which linked student performance to punitive outcomes for educators, the *Blueprint* outlined approaches to develop and implement effective systems of teacher and principal evaluation and support, including: the use of student growth as the means to identify highly effective teachers and principals; the implementation of these effective practices to inform professional development opportunities for others; and an emphasis on linking evidence of improvement in student learning to the professional development experience (United States Department of Education, 2010).

The *Blueprint for Reform* was the first federal guideline of its kind. It established student achievement data as the measure for all reform efforts. It required all professional development to be based on effective practice, and personalized to a school or educator. Funding was provided to support these efforts. Through the *Blueprint for Reform*, a connection between the research on professional learning and professional development guidelines began to emerge.

### **2.1.9 Conclusion**

During the fifty years between 1965 and 2015, significant educational reform has taken place in the United States. With each federal and state legislative restructuring effort, professional development has been recognized as one of the key areas critical to the improvement of teaching and learning. Recently, professional development requirements specific to school leaders and principals have been further defined and expanded. While much progress has been made, federal and state governments recognize the need for continued education reform in the United States. As stated by Secretary Duncan, during his remarks on the 50th Anniversary of Congress Passing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, "... And a new bill needs to do more to support teachers and principals, and ensure that highly skilled educators are teaching where they are needed most. Great teachers and school leaders are critically, critically important to providing true opportunity" (United States Department of Education, n.d.-b).

## **2.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

A conceptual framework is an organizational structure or model that guides a researcher to consider data collection before embarking on a study. A conceptual framework helps to arrange and situate a topic in relation to other key ideas and concepts (Maxwell, 2011). As researchers have attempted to understand topics and processes, they have utilized conceptual frameworks - both general frameworks and frameworks specific to the field of education. In this section,

several conceptual frameworks that have evolved and been used as the basis for interpreting professional development practices will be summarized.

### **2.2.1 Evolution of Conceptual Frameworks**

In 1959, Kirkpatrick contributed one of the earliest conceptual frameworks, which included a four-level framework for evaluating professional learning in business. Later applied to education, Kirkpatrick's model reflected an increasingly more complex indication of effectiveness (King, 2014). Another similar framework was introduced several years later when Stake (1967) presented a countenance model based on two features of evaluation, description and judgment. Within each feature, or countenance, researchers identify three parts: antecedents, the transactions, and the outcomes. This framework, if applied to a professional development experience could yield valuable results. Researchers would then be able to determine the impact (outcomes) a particular professional development experience (transactions) had on a certain school or teacher (antecedents). It is difficult to determine a causal relationship between a professional development experience and its outcomes, particularly given the mitigating factors surrounding any experience (Guskey, 2002; King, 2014). Comparably, Stufflebeam (2003) presented a model representing Context, Input, Processes, and Product (CIPP), which is a framework is used to evaluate educational programs, personnel, products, organizations, and systems. Guskey's (2002) model takes a five-tiered approach to program evaluation by beginning with questions at the lowest levels to gather data about participants' reactions for the purpose of improving the program design and delivery followed by questions at the higher levels to evaluate participants' acquisition and use of knowledge and skills followed by impact of the professional development. An important consideration regarding Guskey's (2002) model is the

recognition of the content-specific nature of professional development, which indicates the importance of planning professional development based on intended learning outcomes for students rather than on a generic structure or model of “best practices” of professional development (Guskey, 2002, King 2014).

At approximately the same time, the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) outlined an eight step process to assess the impact of professional development. Joellen Killion (2002) and a team of experts in evaluation and professional development determined the ability to evaluate a program is linked directly to the strength and duration of the professional development. In developing a process for evaluation, a theory of change model and a logic model were used as the foundation. A theory of change model identifies both the assumptions of a situation or program, as well as the sequence of actions necessary to reach an intended goal (Killion, 2002). Additionally, a logic model translates the identified actions from the theory of change model into definable outcomes so that they may be analyzed (Killion, 2002; Killion, 2003). Another subsequent hierarchical model was introduced by Bubb and Earley (2010), and includes twelve levels of the evaluation process organized into three groups: preparation, development, and improvement. Inherent in the model is the understanding that lower levels of thought and activity must occur in order to reach the higher levels and establish a cause and effect relationship (Stoll, Harris, & Handscomb, 2012). Distinct from earlier models, Bubb and Early’s level one activities focus on planning for evaluation. This suggests that planning the evaluation of professional development in advance will improve the outcomes desired in subsequent levels, and is consistent with the recommendations of other evaluation experts (Guskey, 2002; Haslam, 2010; King, 2014). Recognizing that opponents to the notion of hierarchical evaluation believe a more context-specific approach will yield more applicable

results for their experience, King (2014) endeavored to create her own evaluation framework to assess the short- and long-term impact of a professional development initiative. King’s Provisional Professional Development Impact Evaluation Framework was built on the foundation of earlier models while establishing several additional components to the frameworks devised by Guskey (2002) and Bubb and Earley (2010). Similar to previous models, the framework was based on four components: the experience, the learning, the degree and quality of change, and pupil outcomes. Additional elements for consideration included systemic factors, staff outcomes, and diffusion – none of which had been incorporated in earlier conceptual models.

Conceptual frameworks provide a structure for researchers to guide the process of understanding professional development. The frameworks described in the previous section are presented in summary form in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Frameworks for the Evaluation of Professional Development

Framework (Year)	Components
Kirkpatrick (1959)	Four Levels: Level One – Reactions to Training Level Two – Acquisition of Skills/Knowledge Level Three – Application of Learning Level Four – Outcomes from Training
Stake (1967)	Two Features: 1. Description 2. Judgment Three Parts for Each Feature: 1. Antecedent – Current Status and/or Causes 2. Transactions – Changes and/or Actions 3. Outcomes – Effects and/or Results Evaluate: 1. Congruence = Similarity 2. Contingence = Cause and Effect
Stufflebeam (2003)	CIPP Model Context – Plan, Gather, Situate Area of Study Input – Define Mission, Goals, Plan of Study Process – Evaluate Implementation, Modify Product – Assess Outcomes and Goals

**Table #2 (Continued)**

Guskey (2002)	<p>Level One – Gather Data            Level Two – Assess Learning            Level Three – Investigate Organization Support/Change            Level Four – Evaluate Application of Skills/Knowledge            Level Five – Assess Impact</p>
Killion (2003)	<p>Planning Phase:            1. Assess Evaluability            2. Formulate Evaluation Questions            3. Construct Evaluation Framework</p> <p>Conducting Phase:            4. Collect Data            5. Organize and Analyze Data            6. Interpret data</p> <p>Reporting Phase:            7. Disseminate Findings            8. Evaluate the Evaluation</p>
Bubb and Earley (2010)	<p>Three Levels of Evaluation:            Level 1 - Preparation: Determine Overall Aim, Needs, Baseline, Goal and Plan            Level 2 - Development: Experience Activity, New Learning, and Support to Change            Level 3 - Improvement: Apply Learning, Monitor Impact of Change on Pupils, Observe Efficacy of Teachers, Monitor Impact of Change on Staff</p>
King (2014)	<p>Impact Evaluation Framework (King’s Additions):            1. The Experience ( Evidence Base, Targets, Plan)            2. The Learning (Systemic Factors ie. Support, Initiative Design and Impact, Teacher Agency)            3. Degree and Quality of Change (Staff Outcomes - Personal, Professional, Cultural)            4. Pupil Outcomes (Diffusion – Other Adults and Students)</p>

**2.2.2 Desimone Framework**

While researchers have contributed several recommendations for conceptual frameworks to evaluate professional development, one idea posits: To effectively measure the wide range of activities as part of professional learning, attention must focus on the critical features of the activity rather than on the type or structure of the activity (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Yoon, 2002; Desimone, 2009). Based on her studies, Desimone (2009) contends it is the

“features” of professional development that matter in determining effectiveness as they impact changes in teacher knowledge, skills, and practice. She identifies the five core features of professional learning as content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation.

In conjunction with the set of five core features, Desimone (2009) recognizes the contribution of earlier researchers who developed frameworks of evaluation, and she suggests the need to establish an operational theory defining the relationship between professional development and teacher and student outcomes. Desimone explains, “In essence, examining the effects of professional development is analogous to measuring the quality of teachers’ learning experiences, the nature of teacher change, and the extent to which such change affects student learning” (2009, p. 188). In a proposed core conceptual framework model, she presents a causal chain linking four components: professional development; increased teacher knowledge, skills, and changes in beliefs; changes in instruction; and, as a result, improved student learning. Her theory purports that influences in initial components, (ie. professional development), cause changes in consequent components. Following this conceptual framework, Desimone refutes earlier statements indicating that we do not have ample evidence to connect professional development with student learning outcomes (Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008).

The conceptual frameworks which have been used to understand and evaluate professional development share several common features. Many of the frameworks identify four common components in varying levels and arrangements. The common components include participation in an experience, new skills or beliefs, application of the new learning in practice, and changed or improved outcomes. Each framework further identifies factors which make it unique. In discerning among the frameworks in order to understand how to apply a

particular conceptual framework to study at professional development, the professional development experience itself warrants consideration. Desimone (2009) identifies five core features of professional development as the basis of her conceptual framework. Thus, those core features are analyzed in the next section.

## **2.3 A REVIEW OF DESIMONE’S CORE FEATURES OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Desimone (2011) defines professional development as, “a complex array of interrelated learning opportunities” (p. 69), and contends that research supports a core set of features necessary in teacher professional development. In the next section, the core features including content, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation will be defined and explained in the context of other literature on the topic.

### **2.3.1 Core Feature One – Content Focus**

The content focus is defined as the subject matter of the professional development, including the knowledge, skills, and teaching practices related to that subject matter (Desimone, 2009; Garet, et al., 2001). While content focus is recognized as a core feature of teacher professional development, it can be applied to professional development for all educators including principals. There are many options for appropriate content for principal professional development, and researchers agree the content of the learning experience must be organized purposefully and carefully in order to be most beneficial to participants (Guskey, 2013). A

professional development curriculum should include a comprehensive set of foundational goals, objectives, activities, and assessments rather than a set of unrelated topics or activities. Common, research-based curriculum includes various topics such as methods of instruction, structure of organizations, process of change, and the concept of leadership (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005).

Defining the process of learning for educators is a set of standards for professional learning. Standards define expected outcomes in terms of what one should know and be able to do. The *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* were updated recently and serve as the third iteration of professional standards for educational leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). The standards outline ten categories for leaders at all stages of their careers to embrace practices which will improve student learning and achievement. Similarly, in their work to improve school leadership, the Wallace Foundation identified five characteristics of effective school leaders, which include creating a vision, building a positive climate, encouraging leadership in others, improving teaching and learning, and managing school systems (Davis, et al., 2005). Practices aligned to these recognized standards and characteristics of effective leadership are suggested as a content focus for principal professional development learning (Mitgang, 2012).

As is recommended in adult learning, to meet individual needs, professional learning content should be personal to each participant based on the participant's background, experience, and position (Knowles, 1984). Additionally, the use of multiple data sources linking professional development learning with significant participant interests and concerns should supplement basic curriculum (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009). The needs of principals differ at varying stages of their careers; therefore, professional development curriculum must also vary in

order to be appropriate and relevant to novice and experienced principals (Cardno & Youngs, 2013; Keith, 2011). Principals who work at different instructional levels, from elementary to high school, often indicate a desire for differentiated professional development opportunities. Similarly, the demographics of a principal's school influence the content and structure of the professional development (Keith, 2011).

Principals are expected to manage day-to-day school and district operations while also improving teaching and learning. Professional development content must address both tasks to prepare principals to manage the ongoing balance between the two (Miller, 2013). Operational training may include information on administrative procedures, budget and finance, and contractual requirements which will enable a principal to make effective managerial decisions (Peterson, 2002). Simultaneously, meaningful professional development focuses on factors that will directly influence student learning and achievement (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009; Nicholson, Harris-John, & Schimmel, 2005). When designing a professional development opportunity or program, recommended practice combines the acquisition of academic knowledge and theory with the opportunity for practical experience (Lashway, 2003). Thus, the content of principal professional development often includes a balance of knowledge, skills, and practices. In this manner, the professional development content of principals is similar to recommendations for the content of teacher professional development.

### **2.3.2 Core Feature Two – Active Learning**

Active learning is defined as the opportunity for participants to experience discussion, planning and practice throughout professional development. Activities such as observing and being observed, participating in discussions, receiving feedback, and reviewing professional work

products are suggested as part of active learning for teachers (Desimone, 2009; Garet, et al., 2001). Research supports these same strategies as effective for principals. Professional development is often planned and presented on the premise that a principal's practice can be transformed based on a transfer of knowledge from an expert to a practitioner (Nicholson, et al., 2005). However, recommended professional development learning design integrates strategies such as "metacognition, application, feedback, ongoing support, and formative assessment that support change in knowledge, skills, and practices" (Lutrick & Szabo, 2012). Learning design that engages educators in ongoing discussion, planning, and practice is recommended to achieve active participation.

Another recommended strategy in a professional development program is through participant reflection. Reflection will provide adult learners with the opportunity to consider new knowledge and experiences and assimilate those with previous understandings to experience growth (Merriam, 2008). Similarly, a reflective inquiry approach can be used to deepen participant understanding. Reflective inquiry encourages principals to "generate knowledge through a process of systematic inquiry" (Fenwick & Pierce, 2002, p. 3). Principals engage in reading professional literature with selections based on their own personal interest and experience. Through journal writing, participants record their perceptions and reflections of their personal strengths and needs. Reflection may occur prior to, throughout, or after participation in a professional development experience or in between professional learning activities. In order for principals to change or improve their practice, they must first fully understand the practice (Barth, 1986; Trotter, 2006). Reflection allows participants to think deeply and develop an understanding of a concept or topic which can later be applied. Reflection supports other active learning strategies such as observations of practice and review of work. Another important

component of a reflective approach is eliciting feedback from colleagues to prompt further investigation and reflection by principals (Fenwick & Pierce, 2002). Active learning positions the participants as central to the learning experiences of the professional development

### **2.3.3 Core Feature Three – Coherence**

As explained by Desimone (2009), coherence is defined as the level of consistency between the professional learning and the participants' knowledge and beliefs and/or relevant local, state, and federal initiatives. Adult learning research supports the importance of relevant professional learning. Adults are motivated to learn when the learning is personal and relevant to their own needs and interests (Knowles, 1984; Speck, 1996). Relevant learning activities include activities that closely resemble occurrences from everyday work life with processes and products that can be immediately applied in practice. Thus, participants benefit when provided opportunities to examine their own knowledge and beliefs as the basis of content in professional development programs (Evans & Mohr, 2014; Moorman, 1997). Time spent reflecting on daily practice, experiences, and actions will generate authentic issues for consideration. Authentic issues are those the principal experiences as part of typical duties (Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Slabine, 2011). Authentic issues can include topics such as teacher observation and evaluation or data-based decision-making to improve student achievement. Well-planned curriculum, focused on relevant topics and authentic issues such as these, is the foundation on which a quality professional development program must be designed.

Participants benefit from the opportunity to ask questions and share concerns about the issues with which they interact regularly. This input is powerful when it potentially influences professional development program content (Hoffmann & Johnston, 2005). Authentic

professional development, also referred to as job-embedded professional development, enables a participant to learn about topics that are aligned with the needs and goals of a participant's organization or district. One example demonstrating professional development based on a participant's organization is through the use of performance evaluations to determine appropriate learning. Performance evaluations indicate a participant's strengths and needs and are recommended as a key piece of data in determining appropriate professional development content (Miller, 2013). The intent is for the principal to learn specific strategies that can be implemented in a daily position.

School districts often create their own professional development opportunities for principals. One way this occurs is through ongoing supervision and feedback from administrators. Whereas the intent of evaluation is to assess actions and progress toward a goal, the objective of supervision is to promote growth and learning, similar to the intent of professional development (Aseltine, Faryniarz, & Rigazio-DiGilio, 2006). Supervisors are often in a unique position where they can model, explain processes, and provide rationale for decision-making within the context of a district. Principals have an opportunity to observe and interact with the decision-making process in an authentic setting. The use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies increases transparency and provides professional learning for principals (Honig, 2012). Supervision of principals in the Denver Public Schools changed drastically in 2008 when instructional and deputy instructional superintendents were hired to supervise approximately eight to ten school principals each. Principals provided positive feedback about the ongoing interaction rather than just sporadic discussion in times of controversy. Principals in the school system requested more time with their instructional superintendents so the superintendents could conduct regular observations of their practice and serve as a "thought

partner” (Gill, 2013, p.5). Principals reported positive feedback about their access to another professional who could provide professional guidance in an authentic setting.

While there is a range of content for professional development suggested within the research, experts agree those experiences that most closely mimic a principal’s day-to-day problems and dilemmas are most effective (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007). Through simulations of complex, authentic situations, principals combine theoretical and practical knowledge to improve their problem solving skills. Tasks which are job-embedded, authentic, and non-routine are recommended as the type of learning activities that foster future success for professionals (Leithwood, et al., 2004; Salazar, 2007). Non-routine tasks are those tasks which are part of a principal’s duties but which may occur only infrequently. Matching the content and experiences of professional development to principals’ unique interests and needs, experiences, and learning styles will enable them to acquire personal knowledge and grow as professionals (Barth, 1986). Coherence between a participant and professional learning is recommended as an important component in effective professional development

#### **2.3.4 Core Feature Four – Duration**

The duration of professional development is defined by the amount and length of time over which the professional learning takes place. Researchers recommend that professional development should extend over a prolonged period of time in order to allow participants an opportunity to implement new learning and reflect on the learning that occurred through the session (Learning Forward, n.d.). Extended time allows participants to connect new knowledge to previous understandings and increases the likelihood that the new knowledge will influence thinking and cause a change in previous practices (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009; Trotter,

2006). Desimone (2009) defines sufficient duration as lasting a semester and including at least 20 or more hours of contact time. Ongoing professional development ideally includes learning experiences that occur over an extended period of time and include multi-day, day-long, and partial-day work sessions (Peterson, 2002). Typically, professional development has been provided through single day events including in-service sessions, workshops or conferences. These structures do not provide participants the opportunity to reflect or share follow-up information about experiences. Short-term opportunities do not promote effective learning as the application of training requires ample time for experiential learning (Peterson, 2002). Principals can change and improve practice when provided with the opportunity to learn and implement strategies in their daily positions (Joyce & Showers, 1983; Leithwood, et al., 2004). Simply providing principals with sporadic or topic-specific learning may build awareness but will not have the desired effect of helping participants develop the skills that may lead to sustainable change in ideas or practice. Further, by extending professional development over a prolonged period of time, a principal is able to participate without the burden of being away from daily tasks for many consecutive days. Principals are more likely to begin and maintain a professional development experience if it does not interfere with their daily responsibilities (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). The schedule and duration of an experience is another important consideration when determining the effectiveness of professional development.

### **2.3.5 Core Feature Five – Collective Participation**

Collective participation refers to the opportunity for educators to participate with peers or colleagues during professional development and can occur through a variety of structures. Collective participation facilitates discussion and collaboration, which can be critical features of

professional development (Desimone, 2009). Rather than attempt to provide instruction and remediate a principal's practice through listening to a speaker or participating in a self-contained workshop, it is recommended that principals interact with peers and mentors to construct knowledge collaboratively (Desimone, 2009; Evans & Mohr, 1999). While principals often work and learn in isolation, their professional learning is enhanced through the natural interaction of working in partnerships or groups. Learning is a social process involving action and interaction to construct knowledge, and collaboration allows for beneficial interaction, discussion, and reflection among colleagues (Nicholson, et al., 2005). When coupled with ongoing opportunities and a structured environment, collaboration will enable principals to question, explain, challenge, and defend their own assumptions and practice. Through this process, principals engage in collegial discourse to expand prior knowledge and understanding (Nicholson, et al., 2005). Professional development based on direct instruction and including highly interactive methods such as - Socratic questioning, group discussions, role-playing, video case studies and technology-assisted simulations - has been proven effective for adult learners (National Institute for School Leadership). While Desimone recognizes collective participation as a structure for professional learning, there are several recognized variations that employ collective participation strategies. Some of the common strategies will be detailed in the upcoming sections.

### **2.3.5.1 Professional Learning Communities**

A formal approach to connecting with colleagues is possible through the formation of a professional learning community (PLC). One national organization devoted to professional development, Learning Forward, believes professional development will help individuals to improve but is insufficient to ensure that teaching and learning for entire systems improves.

Professional learning communities are formed with a common focus and commitment to student learning, and welcome all participants who share the group's mission. The work of the PLC is to develop a vision of the organization, expectations for group members, and results-based goals for advancement. On-going, job-embedded learning is one expectation of all PLC members (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). In support of professional development, "A corollary assumption is that if the organization is to become effective in helping all students learn, the adults in the organization must also be continually learning" (DuFour, et al., 2006, p. 3). By engaging in a process which includes gathering and analyzing evidence, developing and implementing strategies, analyzing effects, and applying knowledge in a continuous cycle of improvement, principals experience authentic learning and growth. One additional positive result of PLCs is the establishment of collegial relationships that extend beyond the scope of the learning experience (NISL, n.d.). As Barth (1985) explains, "The most powerful form of learning, the most sophisticated form of staff development, comes not from listening to the good words of others but from sharing what we know with others" (p. 93).

### **2.3.5.2 Mentorships**

Throughout history, people have transferred skills and knowledge from one generation to another through stories, shared experiences, and written records. An apprenticeship or mentorship is a relationship which pairs two individuals in the same occupation, one with experience and another desiring to learn the trade. Similarly, in education, a "craft model" pairs a new principal with a seasoned administrator in an educational apprenticeship or mentorship (Fenwick & Pierce, 2002). Through this model, the new principal gains experience within an authentic school setting through the support of a colleague. As Fenwick and Pierce (2002) explain, "A mentor is a professional colleague and critical friend who helps the principal

understand professional norms and job expectations, and provides helpful advice about professional challenges and career ascension” (p.4). Typically a mentor is an experienced principal within the same school or district as the new or aspiring principal and is a well-respected, effective, and innovative professional (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004).

Successful mentor relationships are built on a foundation of mutual trust, respect, and collaboration to provide a relevant, personalized experience for a new principal. By modeling problem-solving approaches and guiding the new principal through decision-making processes, a mentor helps to build the skillset of the developing practitioner. Through the gradual release of responsibility coupled with questioning and feedback, a mentor guides a new principal to become competent and self-assured (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2007). One additional benefit of mentoring is the professional learning experienced by the mentor as part of the cooperative process with the new principal (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). Mentorships have the potential to increase the professional capacity of both the mentor and mentee, inviting both individuals to grow professionally

### **2.3.5.3 Coaching**

Similar to mentorships, a coaching model pairs a novice principal with a more experienced and knowledgeable administrator in a professional relationship. Coaching is “distinct from traditional mentoring in that it typically takes place within a shorter time frame and focuses on the development of specific skills” (Grissom & Harrington, 2010, p. 7). Coaching may also occur between a principal and a supervisor. In certain circumstances, there may not be an appropriate colleague to provide information and feedback to a principal. In this case, a supervisor may serve in the coaching capacity, making certain to keep the supervision and evaluation processes separate (Aseltine, et al., 2006). Mentorship-style models like coaching

are often effective because they incorporate many of the recommended characteristics of effective professional development through an on-going professional relationship in which trust and communication are valued (Grissom & Harrington, 2010).

#### **2.3.5.4 Cohort Groups**

Similarly, another practice in principal professional development is the formation of cohort groups. A cohort may include a combination of new and experienced administrators who engage in discussion, problem-solving, and reflection. This socially cohesive structure claims many benefits, including “enhanced feelings of group affiliation and acceptance, social and emotional support, motivation, persistence, group learning, and mutual assistance” (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2007, p. 10). Cohorts allow principals to meet with a common group of peers over an extended period of time to analyze classroom practice, participate in professional readings and discussion, and visit one another in their daily environments (Darling-Hammond, et. al., 2007; Evans & Mohr, 2014). Because of the extended time spent together in multiple environments and the sharing that occurs through the related activities, the structure of a cohort provides a safe setting in which principals get to know, work, and challenge one another (Evans & Mohr, 2014).

#### **2.3.6 Core Feature – Summary**

The core features of professional development, as identified by Desimone, provide one framework for considering important characteristics of professional development experiences. The framework includes the five core features of content, active learning, coherence, duration,

and collective participation. Examples of these core features are consistent with important characteristics as identified in the body of research on effective professional development.

## **2.4 IMPLICATIONS OF RELATED LITERATURE**

While there is an extensive body of research focused on professional development for educators, and specifically for principals, there is ongoing discussion about how individuals experience professional learning based on their own unique background and situation. This study seeks to understand how one district's principals think about and experience professional learning. Principals will be asked to share their ideas about important features of professional development. Further, principals will be asked to share their experiences with professional development, as well as their perceptions about the impact of professional learning on their professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice. Findings from the study may inform the researcher and the school district in planning future professional development experiences. They may also add to the growing body of literature which seeks to help educators and researchers understand how participants experience professional development.

### **3.0 METHODS**

This qualitative study sought to understand the professional learning perceptions and experiences of principals from a school district in Southwestern Pennsylvania. This chapter begins with a description of professional development and the types of professional development activities experienced by principals. The research questions helped to gather information from participants related to their professional learning. A conceptual framework was utilized to situate the investigation. Findings from a pilot study which informed the research study are presented. The chapter also contains details about the study design including the setting and participants, data collection, and data analysis for this study. The assumptions and limitations of the study are addressed at the conclusion of this chapter.

#### **3.1 DESCRIPTION OF TOPIC AND STUDY**

Professional development for principals, also referred to as professional learning, is a comprehensive process of acquiring skills and knowledge for the purpose of impacting the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009). Professional development enables principals to acquire new learning and experience, required to maintain professional certification and provide effective educational leadership. It is aligned to educational standards and goals, includes ongoing learning experiences, and perpetuates a

continuous cycle of improvement for principals and other educators (Learning Forward, n.d.). State and federal legislation has outlined increasingly higher expectations for the professional development of school leaders including principals. Local school districts and school leaders experience a variety of activities and programs as part of their professional learning.

Through this research study, the professional development experiences of principals from a southwestern Pennsylvania school district were investigated. The study sought to understand the features of professional development identified as important by participants. Participants were asked to consider recognized characteristics of professional development in relation to their professional learning experiences. Further, they considered their professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice in relation to their experiences with professional development. The researcher, a central office administrator in the school district being studied, conducted a case study investigation of the professional learning perceptions and experiences of the district's principals. Through the study, the researcher sought understand how the building administrators experience professional learning in order to potentially make decisions about future principal professional development plans in the district.

### **3.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Professional learning for educators has been included in both federal and state legislation over the past fifty years. Beginning with the initial passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 and in several subsequent reauthorizations of ESEA, requirements for the professional learning of educators have been increasingly defined and developed. Pennsylvania has similarly expanded the requirements regarding professional

development for both teachers and school leaders. Act 48 of 1999 outlined expectations for Pennsylvania's educators to earn a required number of hours of professional development within a designated time period. The term educators included all teachers and school and district leaders. Subsequently, Act 45 of 2007 outlined recommendations specific to school leaders, including principals, assistant principals, and central office administrators, to earn professional development hours in conjunction with the Act 48 hours. The Act sets forth several requirements applicable to public and private schools in Pennsylvania, including the need for the professional education to be specifically focused on the Pennsylvania school leadership standards (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.-b).

Professional development supports the preparation and preservation of high quality instructional leaders who will positively impact teaching and learning (Council of Chief State of School Officers, 2008). One of the primary responsibilities of a central office administrator is to plan and provide professional development for the building principals and assistant principals. Given the increasing expectations for professional development, it is important to understand recommendations for the ways in which professional development should be planned and presented as well as how principals experience professional learning in order to maximize their learning opportunities.

Through this study, the professional development perceptions and experiences of one district's principals were investigated. Professional development literature has recognized characteristics of effective professional development for educators. Principals were asked about their experiences in relation to the recognized characteristics of effective professional learning. They were asked about the impact of the learning experiences on their professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice. The findings will primarily inform the central office administrators about

the professional development experiences and perceptions of the district principals. The study may additionally provide information to other central office administrators who plan and provide professional development for principals. Further, the findings may also potentially inform the literature on the recognized characteristics of professional learning.

### **3.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The purpose of this research study was to understand the perceptions and experiences of one school district's principals related to their professional learning. Specifically, the following research questions were investigated:

Q1. What do principals identify as important characteristics of professional learning?

Q2. How do principals describe the relationship between important characteristics of professional learning and their professional development experiences?

Q3. How do principals view the impact of their professional development experiences on their professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice?

### **3.4 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The conceptual framework for the study was based on components from the review of literature, including recommended characteristics of professional learning and an understanding of how professional development is related to participant outcomes. Researchers contend that in order to

study the wide range of activities as part of professional learning, attention must focus on the critical features of the activity (Desimone, 2009; Garet, et al., 2002).

For the purpose of this research study, Desimone’s (2009) five core features of professional development were utilized as a framework for examining the components of professional development. Based on her research, Desimone offers that the “features” of professional development influence outcomes rather than the types of professional learning activities. She identifies the five core features of professional learning as content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation and contends these five features must be present in professional learning. The core features she cites specifically refer to professional development experienced by teachers. Given the similarities between professional learning by teachers and principals, and for the purpose of this study, the core features were analyzed in relation to the professional development experiences of principals. The core features are described in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Desimone’s Core Features of Professional Development

Core Feature of Professional Development	Description
Content Focus	Subject matter content including related knowledge, skills, and practices
Active Learning	Active participation in activities rather than passive transmission of information
Coherence	Level of consistency between the professional development and the participant and/or relevant federal, state, and local initiatives
Duration	Length of time and amount of professional development
Collective Participation	Interaction between and among participants rather than learning in isolation

Content focus is the first identified feature. It is essentially the subject matter of the professional development experience, and it is acknowledged as possibly the most instrumental factor because it links the teaching and learning of content matter with subsequent improvements in

practice and increases in student achievement (Desimone, 2009). Principals were asked to reflect on the content of their professional learning experiences. The next feature, active learning, is described as the opportunity for participants to contribute to their own learning rather than experience learning in a passive environment. Examples of active learning include observing, giving and receiving feedback, presenting material, and analyzing and synthesizing information using a variety of instructional strategies (Desimone, 2009). Coherence is defined as the level of consistency between the professional learning and the participant's unique position. Coherence can be explained by the connectedness between the professional development and a participant's knowledge and beliefs. The coherence of the professional development can also be explained in relation to relevant local, state, and federal initiatives. The fourth core feature is the duration of the professional development. Duration includes both the time period over which the learning should occur along with the extent of hours of engaged learning time. It is recommended that professional development should extend minimally for one semester and should include 20 hours of contact (Desimone, 2009). Finally, collective participation is the fifth feature and considers the groupings and configurations recommended for professional learning. Given the variety of professional development options for principals, there are numerous options available for learning individually or collectively. Collegiality through grade level or subject-area grouping is recommended to build an interactive community of professional learners (Desimone, 2009). For the purpose of this research study, the five core features of professional development were utilized as a framework for examining the components of professional development identified as important by district principals and understanding the principals' professional learning experiences.

In conjunction with the set of five core features, which are described as essential in all professional development, Desimone recognizes the contribution of earlier researchers who developed frameworks of evaluation. She suggests the need to establish an operational theory defining the relationship between professional development and teacher and student outcomes and explains, “In essence, examining the effects of professional development is analogous to measuring the quality of teachers’ learning experiences, the nature of teacher change, and the extent to which such change affects student learning” (Desimone, 2009, p. 188). In a proposed core conceptual framework model, she presents a causal chain linking four components: professional development; increased teacher knowledge, skills, and changes in beliefs; changes in instruction; and, as a result, improved student learning. Her theory purports that influences in initial components, (i.e. professional development), cause changes in consequent components. In this research study, the participants’ experiences were analyzed to determine if such a relationship exists between the professional learning and subsequent outcomes. Perception data and participant experiences informed the researcher as to the relationship between the professional learning and outcomes.

### **3.5 PILOT STUDY**

In order to inform this study, a pilot study was conducted with principals who participated in a professional development program sponsored by a local educational organization. The pilot study helped the researcher to determine if the research plan, structure, and processes were appropriate to be used in a subsequent research study on principal professional development

(Seidman, 2013). For the purpose of the pilot study, the participant group included two principals who voluntarily participated. The pilot participants did not meet the requirements for participation in the current study; thus, there is no overlap in participation between the pilot study and research study.

The primary purpose of the pilot study was to ensure the following characteristics of good measurement: The questions are consistently communicated to and understood by respondents, expectations for responses are communicated, respondents have access to the information needed to answer accurately, and respondents are willing to provide the answers called for in the questions (Bickman & Rog, 1998). The results of the pilot study informed the subsequent research study proposed by the researcher. Several changes were made to the study design and interview protocol as a result.

Pilot participants were interviewed using a preliminary set of twelve interview questions. The questions were open-ended, enabling the interviewer to utilize an inductive questioning approach with participants. Based on the data gathered through interviews, a number of changes were made to the interview protocol. The interview protocol included several questions about the participant's background and experiences as a principal. These questions were eliminated, as the responses did not inform the research questions about professional development perceptions and experiences. Instead, questions were added which ask participants to specifically consider both effective and ineffective professional learning and development experiences. While the questions were still designed to be open-ended, they were more focused on an individual's experiences rather than the individual participant.

Additionally, the interview questions were revised to be more specific to the recognized features of professional development based on the conceptual framework. Based on responses to

some questions which did not generate data relative to the recognized features of professional learning, principals were first asked about characteristics of professional development important to them. They were then asked to respond about their experiences in relation to the five recognized core features of professional development framing the study. The questions also enabled participants to share how professional learning has influenced their professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice.

Based on feedback from pilot participants, the overall quality of the questions was improved by eliminating unnecessary wording for greater clarity. The number of questions decreased from twelve to ten for principal participants. While the pilot interviews were completed within 30 minutes rather than the anticipated 45-60-minute timeframe, it was determined the quality of follow-up questions including prompting questions needed to be improved in the research study. After reviewing data from the pilot study interviews, there were several areas which could have been further investigated to provide more detailed information. In an effort to gather data to inform the research questions, the researcher designed several follow-up prompting questions which were utilized to encourage the participants to elaborate on their responses.

Another strategy to improve the quality of responses is the suggestion of a review of documents by each participant to support the interview process. The introductory script was revised to invite participants to reference professional development information prior to the interview. First, participants were reminded of the Act 48 Credit Keeper feature on the Pennsylvania Department of Education website which details the recorded professional development activities for educators. Secondly, participants were encouraged to review any other relevant professional development documents. Participants were encouraged to refer to

and include information from the documents in their interview responses. Moreover, the researcher accepted any written submission of information via the documents or another form, which would provide a response to an interview question. Results from the pilot study have informed several changes in the research methods for the study, which are detailed in the next section.

### **3.6 RESEARCH METHODS**

This research was conducted through a case study of the professional development experiences of school principals. Case study research is appropriate to fully and deeply study the professional development experiences of one school district's principals, as "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009, p.18). The research study endeavored to understand professional development experiences from the participants' perspectives. Case study methods provided the structure to acquire an understanding of the important characteristics of professional development and the relationships between identified characteristics and professional learning experiences and outcomes. Participants' perceptions and experiences are reported with the potential for "an end product being richly descriptive" (Merriam, 2009, p.39).

Within the identified case - the school district principals' professional development experiences - the researcher collected data primarily through interviews. The interview provided participants the opportunity to share their perceptions about professional learning, as well as their experiences with professional development. Prior to the interview, participants were encouraged

to review relevant documents including a listing of all professional development activities as recorded on the Pennsylvania Education Record Management System (PERMS). A document review by participants enabled them to reflect on their participation and recall experiences and information which represent their knowledge, attitudes, and practice. District and building administrators served as individual units of analysis as part of the overall case (Yin, 2009). By conducting a case study of the professional development program, the researcher developed a thorough understanding of the professional development experiences, as shared by the participants.

### **3.7 RESEARCH SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS**

Through the case study, the researcher learned about the professional learning perceptions and experiences of one district's principals. Specifically, the researcher aimed to understand the principal's perceptions about important features of professional development. Additionally, the relationship between identified features of professional learning and the participants' experiences in professional development was studied, including any influence the experiences had on the participants' professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice. Information was gathered through interviews with participants and from relevant professional records.

A purposeful selection of participants identified respondents who are likely to provide information about principal professional development relevant to the research questions (Maxwell, 2011). The researcher used a non-probability criterion-based sampling in which current building administrators within the researcher's district were asked to participate in the research study.

Because the researcher sought understand the professional development perceptions and experiences of the district's principals, all building administrators, including principals and assistant principals, were invited to participate in the study. There were currently eleven building administrators within the school district. Five building administrators are in the district's secondary (7-12) schools. These five participants are not directly evaluated by the researcher, but the researcher does provide supplementary supervision of these administrators. Six participants are in the district's elementary (K-6) schools. These six participants are supervised and evaluated by the researcher.

Each subject demonstrated a willingness to participate voluntarily in this research study. Because the researcher in this study is a former principal and current central office administrator within the district, the researcher does now have responsibility for supervising some of the potential participants. Although the study was non-evaluative and participation will not impact the researcher's supervision or evaluative rating of the participants, it was important that participants had the choice as to whether or not to participate in the study. In order to inform this study, all participants needed to offer their honest insights, and it was a consideration that some may be reluctant to do so because the researcher is their supervisor.

To encourage participation and feedback from participants, they were advised of the goals of the research study. The primary goal was to understand the professional development experiences and perceptions of the district principals in order to inform future planning and decision-making. Moreover, the findings from the study may inform other central office administrators planning professional development and may further inform the literature related to the professional learning of principals. Participants had an opportunity to contribute to their own district, other districts, and the professional literature.

Additionally, there were two central office administrators who were invited to participate. The central office administrators are tasked with planning and providing many of the professional development experiences of district principals. The central office administrators were included to provide their perspective about the professional development experiences that have been provided by the school district. They were asked questions similar to those being asked of the principal participants in order to compare the responses between the two groups.

The participants were contacted via email, provided a description of the study, and invited to voluntarily participate. A copy of the introductory scripts to invite district (Appendix C) and building administrators (Appendix D) is located in the chapter Appendices. Participants were informed that the research study is non-evaluative and was conducted in order to understand their perceptions of and experiences with professional development.

### **3.8 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

Various forms of data were collected and analyzed in the qualitative case study. Each participant was interviewed using the interview questions which are located in the chapter Appendix. Building administrators were asked ten questions specific to professional development experiences, their relation to recognized core features of professional development, and the relationship between professional learning and professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice (Appendix A). Central office administrators were asked similar questions but the nine questions emphasized the information gathered from interactions with principals as well as the planning and implementation of the professional development experiences. The interview questions for central office administrators are located in Appendix B. The researcher used a semi-structured

interview approach to guide the session with pre-determined questions, while enabling flexibility and exploration of themes that emerged during discussion (Merriam, 2009). Several follow-up prompting and probing questions were generated and used by the researcher during the interviews. Interviews were recorded using an audio recording device. Immediately following each interview, the researcher reflected on the interview and prepared a written transcript of the interview dialogue.

As suggested in qualitative studies, data analysis should occur simultaneously with data collection (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Saldana, 2016). Once each interview took place, it was transcribed by the researcher. The transcription was analyzed for the purpose of identifying portions of the data that are aligned to the research questions. Using a document and a system of deductive coding, the finalized transcript had notes added in the review section. Deductive coding enabled the researcher to identify useful segments of data that were aligned to the features of the selected conceptual framework. Additional codes were assigned to the data that was different from the features identified in the conceptual framework.

The interview data was analyzed further in comparison to Desimone's (2009) causal framework linking the influence of the professional development on the knowledge, attitudes, and professional practice of principals. Inductive coding processes was used to identify relationships between the professional development and participant knowledge, attitudes, and/or professional practice.

As explained in Saldana (2016), there are general recommendations for the inclusion of data in research findings. He contends similarly coded data offered by 25% of participants is worthy of analysis and inclusion, while data offered by 75% of respondents merits the establishment of a category or theme. While these recommendations were considered as

benchmarks in the analysis of data in comparison to the framework, all data was considered as part of analysis.

A master list of preliminary codes, including a brief content description and example, was generated in a separate codebook (Saldana, 2016). As subsequent interviews were conducted and analyzed, the interview data was processed in the same manner, with updates, deletions, and changes made to the codes, as necessary.

To prepare participants for the interview, the researcher provided a copy of the interview questions along with the introductory letter. Participants were encouraged to reference and share information from documents to provide insight into their professional development experiences. The Act 48 Record Keeper, found on the Pennsylvania Department of Education website, contains a unique listing of professional development experiences for each professional employee within the commonwealth (PDE, n.d.-a). Participants were asked to review the Act 48 Record Keeper prior to the interview experience. The researcher asked participants to refer to specific examples from the listing on their individualized report. Additionally, participants were asked to review, share, or submit information or documents they believed to be relevant to their professional development knowledge and experiences. Central office administrators were similarly provided with the interview questions along with the introductory script. They were asked to review and potentially share documents that are relevant to their experiences with professional learning.

The researcher reviewed all of the documentation to identify potential categories aligned to the research questions. The information and documents were analyzed for the presence or absence of Desimone's (2009) five core features of professional development used to frame this study. Further, through the review, there was identification of features not included in the

selected framework. Similar to the analysis of other forms of data, an inductive coding process was used to identify relationships between the professional development and participant knowledge, attitudes, and/or professional practice. The researcher requested documents to support the ideas gleaned from participant interviews; however, while some participants referred to their PERMS record, no participants submitted supplementary documents for consideration. Within each research question, there were multiple sources of data for consideration so that the researcher may attempt to achieve methodological triangulation (Stake, 1995).

Further data analysis took place through the preparation of analytic memos. The analytic memos were utilized to document the researcher's "coding processes and code choices, how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories, and subcategories, themes and concepts" which emerge from the data (Saldana, 2016, p. 44). The memos provided the researcher the opportunity to reflect on the data collection and analysis process in order to identify any additional data gathering or analysis necessary. As analysis of the data indicated a need for additional data collection and examination, the researcher noted the data area and included this information in the findings.

Once all data was gathered, a set of categories was compiled based on patterns in the codes. The categories were named to represent the themes inherent in the data. Using Merriam's (2009) suggested approach, the categories were analyzed to ensure they meet five important criteria: reactive to research questions, comprehensive in scope, exclusive in category, representative of the data, and consistent in categorization. The researcher established a set of question to be used to analyze each of the five criteria. Table 4 includes these questions for analyzing data categories.

**Table 4.** Reflection Questions for Analyzing Categories

Criteria	Reflection Questions
Reactive to Research Questions	Does each category align to one or more research questions? Are there categories that do not align with a research question?
Comprehensive in Scope	Are the categories representative of the entire research study? Do the categories represent all research questions?
Exclusive in Category	Does all information belong within the given category? Is there information in a category which belongs elsewhere?
Representative of the Data	Are the categories inclusive of all data collected? Are all patterns in coding included in the data categories?
Consistent in Categorization	Were consistent methods used to code and categorize the data?

Each category was considered individually against the criteria, followed by an analysis of the full complement of categories. The creation of a graphic representation of the categories helped the researcher to determine that data collected represent a thorough analysis of the research questions under consideration. This final step of data analysis provided the researcher the opportunity to identify gaps in data that were recommended as potential areas for further study.

Throughout data collection and analysis, pseudonyms were assigned to the participants in order to protect participants' anonymity. All forms of data including the interview recordings, interview transcriptions, documents, and analytic memos were saved on an encrypted file on the University network. Table 5 summarizes the data collection and analysis that took place to answer the research questions.

**Table 5.** Data Collection and Analysis

Research Question	Data Source	Data Collection	Data Analysis
Q1. What do principals identify as important characteristics of professional learning?	Building Administrator Interviews	Qs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio Recordings</li> <li>• Anecdotal Notes</li> <li>• Act 48 Record Keeper</li> <li>• Documents/Artifacts – Optional Review and Submission by Participants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Deductive coding to identify components of core features as compared to framework</li> <li>○ Writing of analytic memos as reflections on coding process</li> <li>○ Consideration of additional codes which may emerge</li> </ul>
	Central office Administrator Interviews	Qs. 1, 2, 3, 4 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio Recordings</li> <li>• Anecdotal Notes</li> <li>• Documents/Artifacts – Optional Review and Submission by Participants</li> </ul>	
Q2. How do principals describe the relationship between recognized features of professional learning and their professional learning experiences?	Building Administrator Interviews	Q. 6 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio Recordings</li> <li>• Anecdotal Notes</li> <li>• Act 48 Record Keeper</li> <li>• Documents/Artifacts – Optional Review and Submission by Participants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Deductive coding to identify components of core features as compared to framework</li> <li>○ Deductive coding to compare identified components of core features to components in general</li> <li>○ Writing of analytic memos as reflections on coding process</li> <li>○ Consideration of additional codes which may emerge</li> </ul>
	Central office Administrator Interviews	Q. 5 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio Recordings</li> <li>• Anecdotal Notes</li> <li>• Documents/Artifacts – Optional Review and Submission by Participants</li> </ul>	
Q3. How do principals describe the relationship between their professional development experiences and their professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice?	Building Administrator Interviews	Qs. 7, 8, 9, 10 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio Recordings</li> <li>• Anecdotal Notes</li> <li>• Documents/Artifacts – Optional Review and Submission by Participants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Inductive coding to identify relationships between: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PD and knowledge</li> <li>PD and attitudes</li> <li>PD and practice</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Writing of analytic memos as reflections on coding process</li> </ul>
	Central office Administrator Interviews	Qs. 6, 7, 8, 9 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio Recordings</li> <li>• Anecdotal Notes</li> <li>• Documents/Artifacts – Optional Review and Submission by Participants</li> </ul>	

The purpose of data analysis is to organize and make sense of the data. The methods described in this section rely on coding as a primary means of interpreting the data. As described by Saldana, “Coding is just one way of analyzing qualitative data, not *the* way” (2016, p. 3). For the research study on professional development, a topic which yielded a large set of data both unique to each participant and common to groups of participants, coding provided an opportunity to arrange and understand the data. Despite critiques to coding that it may be limiting, mechanical, or outdated, the coding processes described in this section enabled the researcher to analyze the data in relation to recognized frameworks and make recommendations based on the data (Saldana, 2016).

The researcher aimed to identify commonalities in the important characteristics of professional development, as identified by participants. Further, the data was analyzed to determine what relationship exists between participant experiences and the recognized characteristics of professional development. Analysis indicated that participants have experienced and value the recognized characteristics as well as other characteristics that have not been identified in the literature. Finally, data analysis identified relationships between participant experiences and professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice. Links between specific features of an activity and subsequent outcomes were established.

### **3.9 LIMITATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS OF THE STUDY**

Several limitations were evident throughout this study in which the researcher sought to understand professional development experiences and perceptions of one district’s principals.

The researcher was studying the experiences of principals within her own district. The researcher was formerly a principal within the same district and thus has experienced professional development with the study participants. Additionally, since moving into the role of central office administrator, the researcher has planned and provided some of the professional development which has been experienced by participants. Given the researcher's experience in both roles, the researcher needed to maintain objectivity in reporting the events as contributed by both the central office and building administrators. While the researcher's position could have been considered a limitation, the researcher's experiences and perspective of the professional development facilitated an enriched analysis of the data.

Further, as a central office administrator, the researcher does have responsibility for evaluating six of the eleven potential respondents with some supervisory responsibilities for the remaining five principal participants. While it was assumed that the principals will share honest, accurate information based on their perceptions and experiences, it was worth noting that responses may be tempered based on the dynamic which exists between the researcher and participant. Respondents were advised that participation was non-evaluative, with no effect on the professional rating. However, given the nature of the researcher's involvement in the professional development process, it is recognized that some principal respondents may have been hesitant to share negative perceptions or experiences (Yariv, 2006). In order to assure the participants of no ill-effects of participation, the researcher explained in the introductory script that the purpose was to understand the participant perspective and potentially use the information for future professional development planning.

Because of the researcher's role with district-related professional development, it was possible that those being interviewed may assume the researcher has knowledge or

understandings about some experiences. Thus, there was the potential that district and/or building administrators may not report fully their thoughts and experiences. The researcher was aware of this potential limitation, and the researcher asked prompting or probing questions to encourage sharing of information, while doing so without forcing a response from the participants. Additionally, all principals were encouraged to share information about professional development experiences both within and outside the school district. Thus, principal participants had several non-district experiences on which to reflect and comment.

One additional limitation in the study was in relation to the timing of the research study. Participants were asked to reflect on a variety of professional development experiences and how they may have influenced their knowledge, attitudes, and professional practice. Ideally, participants would have completed a pre-assessment of these areas prior to the experiences and then a post-assessment following the professional development. However, without that information, the study relied on participants completing a retrospective pre- and post-assessment, recalling simultaneously their knowledge, attitudes, and practice both before and after the experiences. Providing participants with interview questions ahead of time and encouraging them to review professional development documents potentially increased the quality and quantity of recalled experiences.

Finally, this case study strived to understand one district's principals' experiences with professional development. While the study potentially provided an in-depth look at the event, the results are not generalizable to other locations or events. The case-specific information was informative to the researcher and school district in regard to professional learning for their principals. It may also be informative to other districts or professionals who are responsible for planning professional development for principals. While the study may inform the literature on

principal professional development, the primary purpose of the study was to inform and potentially improve one district's professional development for principals.

### **3.10 CONCLUSION**

This case study of the perceptions of professional development as shared by one district's principals has informed the researcher, and may potentially inform the participants, the district, and the literature. The professional development perceptions of principals and experiences were investigated in relation to Desimone's (2009) suggested core features of professional learning. Further, the study investigated the perceptions and experiences of principals to determine the influence of the program on professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice. Given the increasing importance of professional development to individuals and school districts, this study which looked deeply at the planning, implementation, perceptions, and experiences of participants in professional development was uniquely informative. Findings may be used to plan future professional development programs for the participating district and for other school districts. As indicated in principal professional development literature, the participants' perspective and feedback is important in providing quality learning experiences (Bischel, 2008). Through this study, participant input was gathered and considered.

#### **4.0 CORE-FEATURE: CONTENT**

Principals are challenged to provide leadership in teaching and learning that will result in student growth and achievement. Effective professional development is essential in developing the high quality educational leaders who will be prepared to meet this challenge and positively impact the teaching and learning process (Council of Chief State of School Officers, 2008). Recent legislation on professional development suggests the need for educator input in determining what professional development is relevant and necessary (Learning Forward, n.d.).

This case study sought to understand professional learning from the perspective of one district's principals. As a central office administrator who works in the participating district, I met with ten district principals representing elementary, intermediate, middle and high school levels, and two central office administrators. Through semi-structured interviews, the participants shared their views on and experiences with professional development. The following sections will highlight what the participants believe to be the important characteristics of professional learning, how they have experienced those characteristics, and how they view the impact of professional learning on their professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice. The findings from this study will be discussed with conclusions and recommendations proposed to inform the participants' school district about how to structure and facilitate appropriate professional development opportunities for district principals. The information may potentially

enlighten other school administrators responsible for planning and providing professional development for principals.

#### **4.1 IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

Desimone (2009) contends it is the “features” of professional development that are important in determining the effectiveness of the experience. In her conceptual framework, Desimone (2009) identifies the five core features of professional learning for teachers as: content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation. She further asserts that effective professional development will impact changes in teacher knowledge, skills, and practice. Through this case study, Desimone’s conceptual framework was used as a basis to study professional development. These core features were examined to understand if the district principals believed them to be important to professional learning, how the principals may have experienced these features in their own professional development, and how professional development may have impacted their practice. Below, each core feature is defined and examined through the respondents’ perspectives. The findings regarding each core feature are presented followed by a discussion about the core feature. Conclusions and recommendations are provided for consideration.

## 4.2 CONTENT FINDINGS

The content of professional development refers to the subject matter, including the related professional knowledge, skills, and practices relevant to the subject of the professional development (Desimone, 2009; Garet, et al., 2001). It is recommended that professional development content for principals should be aligned to standards for professional learning and focused on strategies used by effective school leaders to improve student achievement (Davis, et al., 2005; Mitgang, 2012; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Professional development content for principals should be organized around a set of foundational goals, objectives, activities, and assessments. Further, content may include topics such as methods of instruction, structure of organizations, process of change, and the concept of leadership (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005). Given these recommendations, principals in the case study described the features of professional development that they believed to be important to their professional learning experiences.

When identifying important features of professional development, district principals reported the content of the professional development as a factor influencing its effectiveness. The principals shared a variety of specific examples of important content including leadership, data analysis, school safety, curriculum and instruction, and school culture. Participants described these topics as important because of the topic's relevance to a principal's everyday roles and responsibilities. For example, a principal who identified school safety as important professional development content did so because a daily responsibility of the principal is to ensure the safety and security of the building's students, staff, and visitors. While no single content-related topic was identified as being more important than others, there was consensus

among principals on the need for interaction with relevant content that can be applied immediately in practice. A central office administrator likewise spoke of the importance of providing content that is practical and can be used in the principals' everyday work. Research supports this finding, which proposes the content of professional development must be designed to meet individual needs and be relevant to each principal's background, experience, and position (Knowles, 1984).

As Principal Josh shared, "It is critical that the content needs to be what you are currently working with." Josh further listed several examples of trainings during which relevant content was the focus of the professional learning, including a recent professional development session on the Pennsylvania Value-Added Assessment System (PVAAS). This PVAAS training provided principals with an opportunity to view video samples of professional conversations between principals and teachers during which student achievement results were discussed. The principals also learned of potential questions that could be posed to teachers and had a chance to discuss the approaches used in the videos. The content was timely because principals were scheduled to engage in would be having similar discussions with teachers during the upcoming weeks. Hence, Josh described participation as beneficial because the content was immediately applicable to his professional responsibility and a district area of focus.

Central office Administrator Thomas described a similar experience provided for principals in which relevant content led to a meaningful professional development experience. District principals are tasked with analyzing student data in order to make building level goals and plans. In looking at a relatively new set of data acquired through Classroom Diagnostic Testing (CDT), principals used the actual data from the first round of testing to better understand

the data and how to interpret it. Thomas described the effectiveness of using real data as part of the content of the professional development.

Sometimes the data is contrived and that doesn't really apply or impact anyone so they're [the principals] are not interested. But if we pull our data that we know we have a problem with and apply the techniques and skills to that data, I think that makes it more meaningful.

Thomas's description reflects the importance of job-embedded professional development content relevant to the participant. This finding aligns with research on recognized characteristics of effective professional development (Garet, et al., 2001).

Another principal, Anne, contributed an important consideration about the content of professional learning. She defined content as important "if there is a sense of urgency for needing to know the content for a supervisory expectation or in response to a mistake or error." Anne's response suggests the importance of timely, relevant content that prepares principals to complete their respective daily tasks with success. For example, Anne spoke of a professional development opportunity during which she selected content related to her self-identified professional needs. As part of professional development program, Anne completed a self-assessment related to the topic of data. She then completed brief, online learning modules based on the content of her choice. Although Anne reported that the learning experience was lacking in other core features, she described the professional learning as meaningful, nonetheless, because the content was individualized and resulted in takeaways relevant to her identified professional needs regarding data. Based on the principal input, the content of professional development content is important and must be applicable to the participant.

Several other principals shared input similar to Anne's when referencing the importance of personalization of professional development content based on their professional position. For example, principals mentioned the importance of learning content relevant to the grade levels they supervise. They reported having different learning needs based on whether they work in an elementary, middle or high school. Principal Noah described the value for him in working with other principals from the same county where many of the students are demographically similar. He shared, "Our kids are just like (District A's) kids and if this (strategy) is working for them then we should learn about it and try it here." These findings from the principals align with literature on professional development. Principals often indicate a desire for differentiated professional development opportunities and content based on the demographics of the principal's school (Keith, 2011). Consistent with research, district principals emphasized their desire for personalized content as part of their professional development.

Also reported in the literature is the importance of professional development that provides content useful to principals at varying stages of their careers (Cardno & Youngs, 2013; Keith, 2011). A pattern emerged in which the participating principals described an evolution of selecting professional development content throughout their career. Early on, particularly while working as teachers, the principals' made professional learning choices based on interest. The principals described being more apt to attend a training on something interesting, while being less concerned about the immediate application of the learning. However, once they choose to move into an administrative position, principals made professional learning decisions based primarily on their professional needs as principals, or even on the professional needs of the staff members in their buildings. As offered by Principal Chris,

When I first became an administrator, it was just more centered on me, not me getting information to transmit to other people. It was new to me being an administrator. So I would just take in everything on how to do certain processes, what I had to follow.

Likewise, Josh contends:

Basically it (professional development) is based upon my interest and the need. Looking at those two things, it's funny how that's transitioned from when I was a teacher. It was all about interest. What interests me, what types of experiences do I want, what do I like to learn about. Then as an administrator, it became what do I need to know about? I think that a lot of times because when you experience PD as an administrator you know that eventually you're going to be sharing this knowledge. As teacher it's impacting your practice of what you're doing and maybe your students. You're much more visible with the knowledge that you have, so you are more focused. You are more thinking about how does this apply to my teachers? The same way a teacher would say, how does this apply to my classroom? We're always looking at our staff, and then we're going to be on stage facilitating.

Similarly, Principal Faith shared an experience with a training related to Child Services in which she participated while still a teacher. She described the training as ineffective from her perspective as a teacher because the content was not immediately relevant. However, once Faith moved into the role of a principal, the training and content became extremely relevant and the principal reflected, "(I) should have paid closer attention in that training." Being able to put the training into practice changed Faith's opinion about the content of professional development. Research explains this pattern that recognizes that the needs of principals differ at varying stages of their careers; therefore, professional development curriculum must also vary in order to be

appropriate and relevant to novice and experienced principals (Cardno & Youngs, 2013; Keith, 2011).

Literature indicates a need for professional development content for principals aligned to a set of standards for professional learning, such as the recently updated Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (Davis, et al., 2005; Mitgang, 2012; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). While participating principals did not specifically mention professional standards as important to the content of professional development, one principal shared her positive experience in a standards-based professional development course. Principal Lee attended a National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) course as part of the Principal Induction program. NISL courses are aligned to the Pennsylvania school leadership standards and are based on content proven to impact student achievement (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.-b). The content of the NISL course was focused on leadership, and Principal Lee recalled learning about various types of leadership relative to her position as a principal. She described the professional development content as helpful in understanding leadership from the perspective of her staff and she described feeling that she grew as a leader as a result. While the principal described the value of her standards-based professional development course, she did not specifically mention standards as important to the content of the course.

One central office administrator contributed input on the importance of standards-based professional development. Administrator John described the need for professional development, “to be based on a set of goals and objectives, with a strong focus on improving teaching and learning for improved student achievement.” Without using the term standards specifically, the Administrator described the intentional planning and implementation of professional learning based on a set of recommended practices. Similar to principals, the administrators did not

elaborate on the need for standards-based professional development content. Based on the limited discussion from both principals and administrators related to standards, additional exploration of standards-based professional development is worthy of future consideration.

Principals provided several examples of the importance of personalized, relevant professional development content. Central office administrators corroborated the value of content specific to the learner. These examples reflect the importance of professional development content that is aligned to professional standards and reflective of a principal's professional position and needs, which may change over the course of a career. Likewise, professional development content must also change to meet the needs of the professional educator.

### **4.3 CONTENT DISCUSSION**

Participants shared several perceptions of and experiences with the content of professional development in response to research questions one and two: Q1. What do principals identify as important characteristics of professional learning? Q2. How do principals describe the relationship between important characteristics of professional learning and their professional development experiences? Principals reported that the content of professional development is an important characteristic of professional learning. When describing their professional learning experiences, the principals routinely began an explanation by talking about the title or content of the session or experience. The principals seemed to identify and evaluate their experiences by the content of the professional learning.

The principals shared many examples of positive professional development experiences. While there was no consensus on a specific topic or content that was better or more essential than other topics, principals agreed on their need for relevant professional development content. Principals described relevance in professional development similarly to the way it was explained in the literature. Relevant professional development is: timely and based on current topics or trends in education; personalized to the principal based on the principal's position, knowledge, and past experiences; and based on content that the principal believes is necessary – either for the principal or for other building staff members (Knowles, 1984). It was interesting to note that principals described personal interest as an important factor in their selection of professional development prior to assuming a principal position. However, after transitioning into a principal position, principals described interest as less important and content relevance as essential. While content remained an important feature of professional development, the type of content desired by principals was reported to evolve over the course of the principals' careers. The evolution suggested a shifting focus from individual needs to the needs of their staff and building. This reflects a pattern typical of practicing principals (Cardno & Youngs, 2013; Keith, 2011).

When thinking about why relevance is the primary consideration for the district principals, I considered all of their experiences as participants in professional development. Several respondents utilized their PERMS records, as prompted in the interview protocol, to recall experiences. It was evident from their records that the principals are participating in many hours of professional development each year. Most have accumulated over 500 hours of recorded professional development during a five-year time period. Given the amount of professional learning in which they participate, it is understandable why they value relevance in

their content. Principals want professional learning experiences that will prepare them to perform their daily tasks and want the time spent to be valuable professional development.

Though the principals' found content relevance and focus on learning that is immediately applicable to be important, there was very little mentioned about the importance of professional development aligned to professional standards. Professional standards are the basis of all effective teaching, learning, and practice (Davis, et al., 2005; Mitgang, 2012; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders are further the basis for a principal's evaluation in Pennsylvania. Given the expectations and schedule of a principal, it would be possible for a principal to fail to engage in a comprehensive consideration of all roles and responsibilities of the position, as outlined in the standards. This could result in principals having unmet needs in relation to their positions. Recognizing this, principals may benefit from support in selecting and participating in a variety of professional development experiences to help them meet current expectations while also promoting professional growth and preparing them for the future. Central office administrators recognized the importance of professional development based on established goals and objectives and are in the position to provide supervision to the district principals. A collaborative approach to professional development planning, including principals and central office administrators, may help principals to identify and participate in professional learning to meet current and future needs.

Worth noting in the discussion of the five core features is the overlap between and among features reported through the principals' examples. While each feature has been analyzed individually, there are components of each example that refer back to one or more of the five core features. This will be noted throughout the discussion of each feature.

#### **4.4 CONTENT CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings from this case study reflect the importance of professional development content in meeting the professional learning needs of principals. Several recommended practices could support the professional development preferences and experiences of principals. These recommendations are explained in the paragraphs below.

To identify professional development relevant to principals and their unique positions, principals would benefit from a regular process of goal-setting around professional development. This process could begin with self-reflection and consideration of all available data sources including the principals' evaluation documents, student achievement data, staff achievement data, staff evaluations, district goals and data, and any other relevant data sources. Based on the principals' current status and the strengths and needs indicated in the data, they might outline professional goals for the upcoming time period. The principals could then meet with their supervisors to discuss the goals and determine personal professional development needs focused on content aligned to the identified areas. A review of all areas of the evaluation document, along with a comprehensive review of the professional standards for principals would be essential in identifying necessary content for future professional development for the principals.

Though the findings indicate the principals' consideration of their own learning needs or the learning needs of their staff members, findings did not point to recognition of professional learning standards in relation to professional learning. Thus, a collaborative process including the principals and supervisors might ensure all relevant individual, building, and district needs are considered while also considering professional learning standards in determining appropriate professional development content for the principals. Supervisors are in the position to use the professional standards in conjunction with the principal evaluation document to facilitate

professional dialogue with the principal around professional learning needs. This means that identified learning needs and recognized standards might both be considerations as part of a comprehensive process of planning professional development.

Following each professional development experience, principals might take time to reflect on the experience. Evaluation of each experience will help principals continually refine their selection of and participation in professional learning. Evaluation may further indicate if valuable time is being spent wisely and the content is meeting the needs of the principal. Given the wide range of opportunities available for professional learning and the principals' desire for relevant content, ongoing evaluation of experiences could help principals to make decisions about professional learning. Supervisors are essential to the evaluation process as they provide input and feedback specific to the principal on his/her areas of strength and professional learning needs. Supervisors are also in the position to recommend or approve specific professional development experiences that may be beneficial to the principal.

While principals remain focused on the day-to-day needs and demands of the position, a collaborative, proactive approach including principals and supervisors could promote a mix of content that will support current topics while continually helping principals to be prepared for upcoming initiatives and requirements. Central office administrators or other principal supervisors are essential in supporting the ongoing professional learning of district principals through their facilitation of goal-setting, monitoring, and evaluating the professional learning of principals. In this case study, the central office administrators expressed their understanding of the importance of professional learning of principals and could be in the ideal position to provide the support and feedback necessary to ensure content aligned to the principals' needs.

Content is one element of professional development identified as a core feature in Desimone's (2009) framework and likewise identified as important by participants. In the next section, examples of another core feature, active participation, will be provided.

## **5.0 CORE FEATURE: ACTIVE LEARNING**

Active learning includes opportunities for participants to engage fully in professional development activities. Learning design that engages professionals as students in ongoing discussion, planning, and practice while encouraging critical thinking and problem solving is the basis of active learning. Suggested active learning activities include: observation of practice, job-embedded simulations, readings, role playing, exchange of feedback, review of professional work products, and other learning opportunities that actively involve the learner (Desimone, 2009; Garet, et al., 2001; Gulumhussein, 2013). Recommended professional development learning design integrates strategies such as “metacognition, application, feedback, ongoing support, and formative assessment that support change in knowledge, skills, and practices” through active learning (Lutrick & Szabo, 2012). For this study, central office administrators and principals were interviewed about their perceptions of and experiences with active learning during professional development.

### **5.1 ACTIVE LEARNING FINDINGS**

All respondents identified active learning as a feature essential to the effectiveness of professional development. Principals shared several examples of active learning strategies that they deem important for effective professional development, and described experiences during

which they were active participants in their own learning. The effective strategies mentioned by participants included: participation in realistic scenarios and simulations, informal and formal discussion, giving and receiving feedback, video-based learning, and ongoing reflection. These examples are consistent with the literature on active learning and are explained in detail in the following paragraphs (Garet, et al., 2001; Gulumhussein, 2013).

Principal Faith noted Student Assistance Program (SAP) training as meaningful professional learning. As she explained, the school district facilitates the SAP program as one method for meeting the needs of at-risk students. In order for a teacher or principal to be a member of a SAP team, the professional must participate in a three-day training experience. When asked to describe the most memorable features of the training, she identified several active learning strategies employed in the experience. Faith reported learning by studying realistic student and family scenarios typical of those presented to a functioning SAP team. Using the scenarios as guides, participants discussed the situations and collaboratively generated plans to solve the problems presented. Participants also engaged in a simulated SAP team parent meeting. During the mock meeting, team members discussed their specific roles, how to complete necessary paperwork, and how to respond to potential parent questions. Faith described these activities as adding favorably to her feeling of preparedness as she left the training and also later when she used the information to lead her building's SAP team. The strategies employed in this professional development mirrored recommended strategies of active learning by providing a job-embedded simulation experience (Garet, et al., 2001). Faith identified the active learning strategies as adding to the effectiveness of the learning opportunity.

Similarly, two district principals reported their participation in Text Dependent Analysis (TDA) training at a local Intermediate Unit as another example of active learning during

professional development. With recent changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment through the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), all students in grades four through eight are responsible for responding to TDA questions in their English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. Educators learned about the process of creating, answering, and scoring text-dependent questions. Teachers and principals were given the opportunity to attend training to learn the criteria for writing and scoring TDAs, followed by a chance to write, read, and score student work samples. Principal Faith recalled:

We were active participants and it was like a role reversal where we were the students and had to really understand how to write, how to create TDAs. Then in small groups we did a lot of think alouds and gallery walks. All of those things had us active the whole time and that is where I feel I benefit the most and what makes it [professional development] effective.

Faith reported learning through her participation in the activities. She mentioned learning about and engaging with two strategies that likewise have been utilized in district classrooms: think alouds and gallery walks. Using a think aloud, the learner considers and explains his/her thinking as a means to open discussion with peers. A gallery walk, which also generates dialogue among colleagues, provides participants an opportunity to view and offer verbal or written feedback on the work of others. Both strategies provided Faith an opportunity to reflect upon her work, converse with, and receive input from peers. These strategies are consistent with research that promotes effective strategies inspiring metacognition and feedback. According to researchers, engaging metacognitive processes, as well as giving and receiving feedback, is recommended in active learning (Lutrick & Szabo, 2012). This is exactly the type of active learning in which Faith reported participating.

Anne provided a third example of learning through engagement in job-related tasks during district-provided professional development on the formal observation process. To learn how to observe their teachers formally, principals and central office administrators met for multiple sessions to review and discuss their formal observations and accompanying reports. The intent of the training was for district principals to discuss the quality of feedback shared with the observed teachers as well as to ensure inter-rater reliability among supervisors. Principal Anne described a training session during which principals “hashed out” the real-life scenarios and reviewed work to determine how to improve principal feedback. Thereafter, Anne was able to take the information and feedback from the session and immediately apply it to conversations with and feedback shared with teachers. As the literature suggests, active learning through exchange of feedback and review of professional work products is recommended for professional development (Desimone, 2009; Garet, et al., 2001; Gulumhussein, 2013). Anne’s experiences included these strategies and were described as meaningful.

Two additional comments that principals shared about their active learning experiences described Crisis Prevention Intervention (CPI) training and safety training conducted with the local police department. In CPI training, what Principal Sarah described as most notable was the opportunity to receive information about how to work with students who may be in crisis, followed immediately with a chance to practice the strategies presented. She described, “One of the things that makes it [CPI training] effective is that there’s coursework and then you’re moving, you’re doing it.” Similarly, training for Principal Homer with the local police department enabled him to learn school-specific safety protocols and procedures directly from local law enforcement. Homer described having the opportunity to practice the procedures in a real-life environment as part of the training. He then returned to the school district to use the

information to create a safety plan for the district. These experiences are recognized as active learning strategies because they enabled the professionals to engage as students would in a classroom (Garet, et al., 2001).

While not always possible to facilitate a simulation or role playing experience in professional learning, principals shared experiences in which video-based learning was equally effective. Principals recognized video-based learning as an effective way to actively engage in professional development. The principals reported watching videos and engaging in discussion with colleagues based on the video content. They described videos that depicted a scenario or simulation of a principal's task and modeled the principal's appropriate planning, decision-making, or interaction with teachers. For example, Principal Josh shared a recent experience in which videos were used to demonstrate how a principal should conference with a teacher in regard to Pennsylvania Value Added Assessment System (PVAAS) scores. Participants viewed the conferences with teachers and noted specific actions and practices. After viewing the videos, principals discussed the specific strategies utilized by the principals in the videos and determined how to facilitate similar discussions with faculty members. Josh described experiencing this same effective strategy in trainings on other content areas including the Educator Effectiveness System and data analysis. Josh finds this type of active learning effective because of the opportunity to engage in job-embedded simulations and discussions.

Principal Sarah described another way in which videos were used effectively to inspire active learning. As part of a School Wide Positive Behavior Support Team, Sarah participated in several trainings on how to conduct interviews with families of struggling students. Team members then videotaped their interviews and submitted them for review by the professional development provider. As Sarah reported:

We would go and do our positive family support interviews, tape record them, and then get feedback from [the presenter] about them. We would then problem solve different ways we could have responded to the family. I found that to be incredibly helpful. He was personalizing the feedback to me as well as to the other participants. I found that very helpful.

Sarah described the group interaction and role-playing as meaningful and cited the value of the feedback provided by the professional development provider. Sarah's experience is another example of active learning as part of effective professional development. Her experience aligns with the literature on recommended active learning strategies in professional development (Garet, et al., 2001; Gulumhussein, 2013).

As reported by principals, video-based learning inspires collegial discussion and feedback during professional development. Similar to live scenarios and simulations, principals described video-based professional development scenarios as effective professional learning because they invite active reflection and dialogue. Video-based professional development is recognized as a strategy with potential to promote deep collaboration and personalized learning experiences that can result in significant, sustained improvements in practice (Wasley, n.d.)

An additional strategy considered an effective way to learn actively is professional reflection. Reflection allows adult learners to consider new knowledge and experiences, and assimilate those with previous understandings to experience growth (Evans & Moore, 2014; Merriam, 2008). Additionally, reflection allows participants to think deeply and develop an understanding of a concept or topic for application later in practice. Finally, reflection supports other active learning strategies such as observations of practice and review of work.

Though Desimone (2009) did not identify reflection as a core feature of professional development, she did acknowledge reflection as a topic worth further consideration as a potential core feature. Two district principals cited the value of reflection during their own professional learning experiences and noted reflection as an important component of their learning in each case:

- Principal Lee described her experience in Gettysburg. “The experience allowed us to reflect on our leadership techniques and usually we don’t have time to do that during the school year. It kind of forced us to do it, allowed us time for some written reflection and some verbal reflection.”
- Principal Josh recalled his experience in inquiry training, describing “a lot of time for reflection, journal writing, and thinking about how to apply this to my current position.”

Time to reflect, either informally by gathering personal thoughts or more formally in writing, helped the principals to understand information and consider how the information applies to future practice. Active learning, as such, positions the participants as central to the learning experiences of the professional development. The principals’ views align with the literature on reflection that supports the value of reflection in connecting new and previously learned information for professional learning and growth (Evans & Moore, 2014; Merriam, 2008).

While discussing the importance of active learning, principals identified strategies they deemed as less effective in professional development. Specifically, principals mentioned activities such as listening, watching, or sitting for long periods of time. Presentations that do not inspire active learning, often termed as “sit and get,” were reported as less effective by

principals. Principals described a general dislike for webinars or PowerPoints, specifically those that are content-based and appropriate for viewing prior to the session. Principals reported the importance of having time to interact with colleagues to discuss presentation information rather than read or listen passively to a presentation. As described by Principal Lee, “What’s ineffective is listening, no doing, usually no saying, it’s just listening.”

Principals shared their disappointment in professional development that does not include ample time for engagement in learning activities. Two principals were eager to point out their willingness to read and prepare ahead of time in order to be able to get right to work and maximize learning time. Principal Anne expressed this as, “seeing the value in grappling” rather than spending too much time building background or establishing a purpose for the training. She described experiences in which valuable time was wasted on preparatory tasks that could have been more appropriately completed prior to the training. Anne described frustration while sitting through a meaningless training while knowing that there are other responsibilities waiting back at work. Anne’s perspective aligns with the literature that recognizes that principals find it difficult to be away from the building to attend professional learning if it interferes with their daily responsibilities (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). Principals described appreciation for professional learning that recognizes the importance of their time and maximizes their learning through active learning experiences.

Principals reported active learning as an essential component of effective professional development. Central office administrators also noted active learning an essential feature of professional learning. Noted in the findings are several examples of active learning experiences that demonstrate its importance. The examples will be discussed further in the next section.

## 5.2 ACTIVE LEARNING DISCUSSION

Principals shared perceptions of and experiences with active learning in professional development, providing insight into the research questions of the case study. In their responses, all principals identified active learning as an important characteristic of professional development. They provided several examples demonstrating the value of active learning in their experiences. Principals identified experiences as effective when they had an opportunity to engage in active learning and further identified the active learning strategies that they preferred. Principals found value in simulations and scenarios that provided an opportunity for them to gather information, engage in discussion with others, and apply their learning in a realistic context. Having the opportunity to practice job-like tasks helped to prepare principals to implement information from the training into the principal's actual position.

Four principals also reported the value of participating in these same types of activities through video viewing or conferencing in lieu of being able to participate in person. Video-based learning is convenient in that one video simulation can be used several times in several different ways, based on the needs of the participants. For example, a video can be paused at a specific point or points for open discussion and can be replayed to emphasize a point or idea. Several different scenarios can be displayed, allowing participants the opportunity to compare and contrast concepts. The flexibility of video-based active learning enables participants to have greater control over the learning experience. When made available following the training, videos become tools that support other preferred practices of participants such as reflection. Videos offer an alternative to in-person professional learning that can be effective in meeting principals' needs (Wasley, n.d.).

Principals also reported time for reflection and feedback during and following learning experiences as effective in professional development. Often professional development did not meet the expectations of a participant when there was not adequate time allotted for participant reflection. If participants do not have time to reflect as part of the session, it is likely they may not get the chance to do so when they return to their daily position. Principals reported that it is important to be given time to reflect on their learning, as reflection is a strategy which is proven to deepen understanding and promote future use (Evans & Moore, 2014; Merriam, 2008). Reflection was recognized as effective by district principals and described as an important part of professional learning experiences.

In addition to the insight provided by principals on active learning strategies that support their learning, they also provided clear opinions about strategies that are not effective in professional development. Principals were generally dissatisfied with experiences that included what they classified as passive activities like sitting and listening. They reflected an understanding for the need to receive quantities of information and recognized this is often done through handouts, PowerPoints, webinars, or explanation from the presenter. These are typically non-preferred professional learning activities. Principals expressed a preference limiting the non-preferred activities by providing any reading or background information ahead of time so that they may come prepared to engage in active learning the desire to have the opportunity to use the information in some way as part of the training. This suggestion has potential to improve professional development by increasing its flexibility. Principals as adult learners are more apt to find learning experiences beneficial when it meets their personal and professional needs and preferences (Merriam, 2008). Through advanced planning prior to the professional development

session, active learning during the training could increase with potential to positively impact another core feature, duration.

Principals shared examples of effective and ineffective professional development experiences and explained how active learning influenced the experience. These findings are informative to those who plan professional development for the participating principals. Recommendations regarding these findings will be presented in the next section.

### **5.3 ACTIVE LEARNING CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The information about active learning from this case study provides insight to those responsible for selecting, planning, and implementing professional development for these principals. Given the consistent input about the importance of active learning for principals, professional development that incorporates active learning strategies is recommended. As part of an overall plan of identifying and selecting professional development to meet the needs of principals, supervisors and principals would be wise to consider not just the content but also the learning activities included in an experience. Administrators are positioned to support this process by investigating professional development options to determine appropriateness for specific principals. An example of a way to achieve this outcome is to consider the input of principals who expressed a preference for having learning content and materials in advance so that reading and other preparation work can be done prior to a professional development session. Professional development sessions could then be spent actively discussing information with colleagues or using the information as part of a realistic scenario or simulation. This could result in less scheduled time together and greater control by participants over how and when they

prepare for the learning experience. While a focus on active rather than passive learning during professional development requires greater preparation on the part of the individual or group providing the professional development, it enables participants to engage in active learning which they find valuable and reduces the time spent on activities that principals reported as less effective.

Based on participants' favorable responses about the value of video-based professional development, it might be considered as a viable option for active learning during professional development. Videos may be especially appropriate when looking for ways to personalize the learning for an individual principal. Participants could be able to access videos prior to or during a learning session and select how to use the video to meet their learning needs. Video resources could also be used effectively as follow up to a learning session to provide ongoing support or even opportunities to prompt reflection by the principals.

Based on the findings from principals, reflection was identified as a valuable component of all professional learning. Principals recognized the importance of having time to consider the new information and ways to assimilate it with current knowledge and practice. To provide this opportunity for principals, time for written or verbal reflection could be incorporated during and following professional learning experiences. Incorporating the reflective feedback into the discussion about professional development with supervisors is essential in creating a dialogue to support an ongoing professional learning plan.

Similar to recommendations for the content of professional development, it is recommended that supervisors talk with principals about the experiences they find to be most valuable. A supervisor's role is critical in helping a principal identify appropriate professional learning experiences that align, not only with necessary content, but also with a principal's

preferred learning style. Through ongoing discussion, a supervisor would be able to make recommendations or provide opportunities for professional learning based on the strengths, needs, and preferences of principals.

Many of the active learning examples included reference to active participation and interaction with colleagues. These characteristics of active learning are related to the next core feature of professional development, which is Collective Participation. As Principal Anne explained:

For a principal to learn, you not only need to be involved in activities where you're willing to reflect, you're willing to do the work ahead of time, and you're really willing to engage, but then you need to be part of this mechanism called your school where everybody's going to be working together to help each other learn at the same time.

Anne's comment demonstrates the connectivity that may be present among the core features, as professionals engage actively and collaboratively to improve teaching and learning. The principal's reflection represents a relationship between active learning and collective participation, another core feature of professional development that will be discussed in the upcoming chapter.

## **6.0 CORE FEATURE: COLLECTIVE PARTICIPATION**

Collective participation refers to the opportunity for educators to interact and work collaboratively with others during professional learning (Desimone, 2009). While principals often work and learn in isolation, their professional learning is enhanced through the natural interaction of working in partnerships or groups on tasks like constructing knowledge, engaging in collegial conversations, and reflecting (Nicholson, et al., 2005). Chapter 6 details the core feature of collective participation and describes how principals perceive and experience collective participation during professional development.

### **6.1 COLLECTIVE PARTICIPATION FINDINGS**

When asked about the importance of collective participation in professional development, principals reported finding great value in interaction and collaboration during professional learning experiences. Principals cited two structures of collective participation that they have found to be effective: cohorts and professional learning communities. When providing examples of professional development conducted through a cohort configuration, the principals cited instances of cohorts with professionals outside of the school district, with other principals within the district, and with other professional staff members within the district. In describing the principals' perceptions of and experiences with collective participation, each of these cohort

configurations will be presented along with the principals' thoughts about professional learning communities.

### **6.1.1 Cohorts – Non-District**

Cohorts are one example of a collective participation structure that allows principals to meet with peers over an extended period of time to analyze practice, engage in professional readings and discussion, and visit one another in typical daily environments (Darling-Hammond, et. al., 2007; Evans & Mohr, 2014). The prolonged time principals spend together engaging in discussion and learning promotes a safe setting in which they get to know, work, and challenge one another (Evans & Mohr, 2014). Three district principals reported participating in the Western Pennsylvania Principals' Academy, an ongoing professional learning cohort for principals across the region. The principals found the experience to be beneficial and specifically reported the value of regularly interacting with other local principals in a professional learning setting. Each of the principals mentioned that some of the most valuable learning from the sessions occurred outside the regular agenda topics when they interacted informally as a cohort. They described having the opportunity to speak casually with cohort members about "problems or issues the district is facing," or about topics such as "culture, relationships, and morale." They further cited the importance of working and sharing ideas with a set of professionals who become colleagues over time through the cohort structure. Other principals similarly shared positive experiences with working with cohort groups:

- Principal Sam referenced participation in another cohort group, the local county principal meetings, as an important professional development experience. He described

the value of collective participation, given “the opportunity to visit other schools, talk with the principals and learn about how things work there.”

- Principal Lee shared positive experiences with a cohort through the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership (PIL) courses. In addition to being able to interact with cohort members during classes, Lee found value in engaging outside of class to discuss upcoming assignments or postings, and finding commonality with people in different positions through shared concerns such as staffing and leadership.
- Principal Faith recalled working with a cohort she described as, “a strong group of people” during principal preparation courses. Faith described looking forward to beginning NISL Induction courses because of the potential to work with another similar group.

The district principals reported experiences that align to the research on cohort groups as an effective structure for professional development. As indicated in research, cohorts are groups of similar individuals who provide support and acceptance to members over an extended period of time (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2007; Evans & Mohr, 2014). Principals in this study valued the supportive relationships developed through the cohort structure. In addition to working with non-district colleagues through a cohort group, principals also reported having the opportunity to work with a cohort of district principals.

### **6.1.2 Cohorts – District Principals**

Within the school district, principals have worked collaboratively toward several professional learning goals in a cohort configuration. For example, the district principals met monthly as a cohort group and received information and training from an expert on the topic of formative

assessment. The principals practiced their new learning during monthly observations in their buildings, and they brought their data to the subsequent professional development session for discussion. This provided a chance for the principals to discuss the information and situations as a group and then apply the learning to the principal's respective level – elementary, middle, or high school. Principal Sam recalled the role of the cohort throughout the multi-year professional development initiative:

We were able to bring back live samples of what she (the professional development facilitator) was trying to get across. So that we could then sit, brainstorm and collaboratively put our efforts together and brainstorm to see what we need to do moving forward. Do we need to monitor and adjust? What was working? What wasn't working?

That to me, that's powerful. That's professional development.

Principal Sam's comments reflect the value he found in working with his district colleagues on a professional development initiative. The "power" of cohort groups, which is supported by research, is also supported by the comments from district principals (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2007; Evans & Mohr, 2014).

Principal Josh similarly reinforced the importance of a district cohort in his professional learning. When describing recent experiences, Josh submitted:

What makes it (professional development) effective is working with your colleagues and it's someone that you're going to talk to on Monday or the following day and say, Remember that session we had? What do you think about this? Or I was thinking this.

A cohort comprised of district colleagues provides the opportunity for principals to reflect on their learning following the experience, and collaborate with trusted teammates at a later time. Josh's comments reflect his belief in the value of engaging with his fellow principals through the

cohort structure. Another similar type of cohort configuration experienced by district principals includes the principals working collaboratively with their staff members. This cohort will be explained in the next section.

### **6.1.3 Cohorts – District Staff**

In addition to principal collaboration, professional development initiatives have also included opportunities for collaboration among principals and representative staff members during professional learning. One example of this occurred during the multi-year focus on formative assessment. In addition to the monthly sessions for the principal group, principals also met collectively with representative staff members from each building to learn about the topic of formative assessment. The sessions were structured similarly to those conducted exclusively for principals, but were focused on instructional rather than leadership content. Principal Sam recalled the power of this principal-teacher cohort:

With the teachers at those sessions alongside me working hand-in-hand and getting to sit with them, I was able to actually see and learn stuff about their particular learning styles and what they are doing in their classroom and kind of bounce ideas between the two of us. So that piece is very beneficial. Now if I was able to do that with my entire faculty ... that would be very helpful, very beneficial. But having individuals there with their principal really takes it to a greater depth.

Sam reflected on the importance of having the chance to meet regularly with a small group of teachers to talk about their instruction and implementation of formative assessment in their classrooms. He further shared a desire to engage in this type of collaboration with each faculty

member and not just a representative few, which substantiates the value of this type of interaction. Sam described the value of a partnership with ideas exchanged between teacher and principal. While a principal-teacher relationship is typically hierarchical in nature, this cohort structure enabled a collegial work relationship, as described by Sam. Essentially, teachers readily shared their thoughts and experiences with their supervisors, and their supervisors benefitted significantly as a result. Research supports the value of cohorts by providing extended time working together, sharing ideas in multiple environments, and creating a safe setting in which to learn (Evans & Mohr, 2014).

Another principal, Homer, contributed additional information about his experiences working with the district formative assessment cohort. Homer emphasized the importance of the collaboration that occurred between the teachers and principals outside of the formal sessions. He described his excitement about the informal work with teachers to implement the formative assessment information and the subsequent impact on practices that were put in place to help students. For example, one group of teachers utilized the concept of formative feedback to provide students with a chance to rewrite and improve written essays prior to summative evaluation. The principal appreciated seeing this implementation and change in practice that resulted in improved learning. Homer believed this was possible because of the ongoing discussion and collaboration fostered through the cohort structure.

Following the district focus on formative assessment, training occurred on a differentiated model of supervision. Principals again had an opportunity to work collaboratively with staff members as part of a cohort to learn the new supervision model. The principal and teachers collaborated during a pilot program in which they learned all the components and procedures associated with the new model. Principals, in turn, shared components of the

information at the building level as well. Principal James recalled value in working with a staff member on the pilot program. James described spending time reviewing various components of the supervision model in order to provide feedback to the teacher. He further recalled sessions conducted in his building when he shared the new learning with his staff. He first shared information with the entire staff and then had an opportunity to work with small groups of selected departments. James describes the growth he experienced while working with a cohort of teachers.

So I would do a half hour to an hour of large group instruction and then I would have my departments that I would be with for the next hour. In sitting beside them, reading, checking, talking, that would be probably how I grew the most.

Similar to previous examples, James described finding value in working collaboratively and discussing ideas with his staff members. Cohort groups provide the structure and opportunity for meaningful professional dialogue to occur. These examples shared by principals reflect positive experiences and professional growth made possible through work in a cohort. Central office Administrator John summarized this point concisely:

I think the most effective approach is when you can sit down and interact with one another and in a collective effort you learn from one another. Whether it is teachers or principals sharing out and having quality time to discuss what is best about teaching and learning, that is what is the most effective professional development.

Because of administration's support of collaborative learning, professionals worked and learned together many times. The cohort configuration enabled principal groups to work in partnership, as well as for principals and teachers to work collaboratively. In the upcoming section, one

principal's experiences while working in a cohort she referred to as a professional learning community will be summarized.

#### **6.1.4 Professional Learning Communities**

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are specific cohorts formed with a common focus and commitment to student learning, with an expectation of on-going, job-embedded learning for all members (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). By engaging in a process that includes gathering and analyzing evidence, developing and implementing strategies, analyzing effects, and applying knowledge in a continuous cycle of improvement, members experience authentic learning and growth as part of collegial relationships that extend beyond the scope of the learning experience itself (NISL, n.d.). In essence, a PLC is a formal, focused cohort often found in education.

Principal Anne led a PLC within her building over the course of a school year. The PLC met monthly and focused on improving mathematics teaching and learning in grades two, three, and four. Anne described the activities of the group that included professional readings and discussion, lesson study, and reviewing student work. When citing the benefits of a cohort structure for professional development, Principal Anne described the work of the math PLC:

I'm particularly proud of the work that the math PLC did. We obviously saw student scores increase. I know that not just because we met monthly and read articles and talked. I know there's a couple of different factors, and I would love to figure out which (impacted the increase). We've gotten some changes in second grade math time. We've gotten a refocus. So it certainly wasn't just the fact that we met every month. But it was very satisfying to know that from the serious discussions we were having with a very

narrow focus on one specific objective, which was algebraic thinking, we could see evidence that that something good was happening. Teachers were telling me that they were learning. And teachers were unbelievably engaged in the discussions. So seeing other people want to be a part of it, asking questions, bringing knowledge, seeing the conversation occur the minute everybody got seated on the stools and I didn't even have to throw out a prompt, was incredibly satisfying. Then feeling as though our efforts made a difference with regard to students' scores was great.

While several principals utilized the term cohort to describe an ideal learning configuration, it is worth noting that this was the only example described by the principal specifically as a professional learning community. Principal Anne believed it was more than just ongoing meetings that led to positive outcomes from the PLC. She described work and discussion focused specifically on one topic, algebraic thinking, and acknowledged that the intense focus contributed to the positive outcome she experienced. Anne's perspective aligns with research on professional learning communities that reflects the distinction between a PLC and a cohort. What sets a PLC apart from other cohorts is the work that occurs in the PLC. The work includes a focus on effective strategies, analysis, evidence, and application as part of a continuous cycle of improvement (NISL, n.d.). Anne reported these practices as important to the professional learning experience.

While Anne and other principals reported on the benefits of collective participation in professional development, there were also reports of challenges associated with collective participation. Examples of the challenges identified by principals will be described in the next section.

### **6.1.5 Challenges of Collective Participation**

Principal Anne described herself as a strong proponent of a collaborative work environment. She described several instances in which her learning was dependent on her interaction with other learners. However, Anne did report a challenge associated with the practice of collective participation with regard to the level and type of interaction and feedback she prefers in professional learning experiences. Specifically, Anne reported instances when she felt willing to share her ideas and work, but felt a lack of engagement by other district participants. She described this as a detriment to her learning. Anne explained:

I have no problem at all with my work or performance being criticized. But I want to do that in a safe environment where I know other people are putting their work and their practices on the line to be critically examined by colleagues. So that's a fine situation to be in as long as it's shared.

This sentiment described a challenge that Anne faced when working collaboratively; she felt this challenge can potentially impede her growth and the growth of others. Research defines the purpose of collaboration as the chance to question, explain, challenge, and defend assumptions and practice in order to expand prior knowledge and understanding (Nicholson, et al., 2005). Anne, who needs to feel engaged and safe when working with colleagues, reported at times a disconnection between what research describes as beneficial, and her experiences. She described experiences as effective when, "I felt like others wanted me to grow as much as I wanted them to grow." While Anne believes in the power of collective participation, she pointed out a challenge of professional collaboration that is worthy of future consideration.

Principal Sarah commented on the challenges she has while working as part of a district cohort. Sarah similarly described collaborating with her district peers as challenging and noted a lack of comfort in sharing information and learning with them at times:

I'll be honest, probably the most challenging group is your peers. Because you are weighing and measuring what you're saying. I'm much more comfortable with strangers. When I'm with people from other school districts, I'm much more willing to share, I think. I obviously learn a lot from interacting with them. I think there's just a level of anxiety that comes about when there's a competitive nature. I guess that can be good, that can push you on to learn more effectively. But also in terms of encouraging participation, I would say it might be a little bit of a detriment.

Principal Sarah reported recognizing the benefit of collaboration and the learning that can occur as a result. However, she also reported a challenge in interacting specifically with district colleagues rather than non-district peers. Research purports the importance of having a safe setting in which to take risks, learn, and grow professionally (Evans & Mohr, 2014). While cohorts are structures that provide this type of environment, two district principals described their challenges in working in a cohort configuration with close colleagues. In light of this information from principals, it is important to consider the challenges mentioned, the factors that lead to the challenges, and the potential impact on professional learning that may result.

In addition to cohorts and professional learning communities, professional development literature identified other structures of collective participation including mentorships and coaching. Principal respondents did not provide examples of either mentorships or coaching when talking about their experiences with collective participation. This finding can be a future

consideration because of the research that supports mentorships and coaching as viable structures to support professional learning.

District principals reported collective participation as an important feature of professional learning. They further reported several instances in which they experienced positive professional development occurrences with collective participation structures in place. While several examples supported collective participation, there were two examples provided by principals as challenges. The findings provide insight and potential areas of future consideration.

## **6.2 COLECTIVE PARTICIPATION DISCUSSION**

Participants identified collective participation as an important feature of effective professional development and provided several examples of their experiences with collective participation in professional learning. While the majority of examples supported the value of collective participation, some participants also identified challenges of working collaboratively in professional learning experiences. Participants offered several examples of collective participation configurations that will be discussed in this section.

Participation in non-district cohorts are one option for meeting the collective participation needs of principals. Principals expressed the importance of having time for informal interaction and discussion with non-district colleagues during professional development. Collaboration with non-district peers produces alternative perspectives and approaches to situations that can be tremendously informative to professionals. A benefit of a non-district cohort is that through discussion with outside colleagues, principals may come to recognize that a situation or concern is not district-specific and may change their perspective as a result. Bringing back information to

the district from an outside professional development experience often enables a principal to grow professionally as well as to contribute to the professional growth of colleagues or building staff. Similar to professional development literature, district principals reported the value of meeting and developing relationships with colleagues who experience similar daily responsibilities and challenges. Non-district cohorts offer an important opportunity for principals to make professional connections outside of their district with the potential to develop relationships that extend outside of the learning experience itself (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Evans & Moore, 2014). This cohort opportunity provides principals another alternative source of information to guide planning and decision-making.

Similarly, principals reported district cohorts as valuable collective participation structures. They described district cohorts as effective structures in promoting a sense of togetherness, community, and continuity among the central office administrative team. Principals acknowledged the power of the cohort in providing an opportunity to collaborate with colleagues on common topics and district areas of focus. Principals value regular access to colleagues with opportunities for follow-up discussion during, following, or in-between professional development. Similar to the role of a teacher, a principal spends much of the day working in isolation from other adults. Particularly in a building where there is only one building administrator, principals plan, make decisions and operate independently. The interaction and familiarity that develops over time through cohorts supports the professional growth of district principals (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Evans & Moore, 2014). An additional benefit of a district cohort is that the relationships formed through the cohort offers principals an alternative source of information than having to request it from a supervisor or central office

administrator. This encourages collaboration and decision-making at the building level with consistency between and among buildings.

Principals further described a meaningful learning opportunity they experienced through a cohort configuration including both district teachers and principals. Typically, there is an established hierarchical relationship within professional development. Principals first receive information and later share it with teachers to increase teacher knowledge. In the district cohort, both principals and teachers received information simultaneously and had opportunities to discuss the information, apply it in practice, and reconvene regularly to discuss experiences. Principals described a partnership relationship that developed through ongoing learning experiences and the implementation of the learning in practice. They reported the value of exchanging ideas and working as learning partners with teachers in these cohorts. Principals reported professional growth through their cohort experience with teachers. Many respondents even suggested the value of having this learning opportunity with all staff members rather than just a representative few. Interestingly, when talking about the benefits of a principal-staff cohort, principals described their own growth as well as the growth of the teachers and the potential impact on teaching, learning, and student achievement.

Similarly, one principal established a cohort specifically termed as a professional learning community. Given the difference in terminology, I was interested to discover how this professional learning experience compared to the cohorts described by other principals. I noted both similarities and differences between the experiences. In each case, principals and teachers met regularly and worked collaboratively toward agenda items. There was evidence of formal and informal interaction throughout both processes and reports of professional growth by principals. Moreover, there were reports of both experiences having an influence beyond the

participants that extended to the classroom and student growth and achievement. Principals described both cohort and PLC experiences as valuable in providing opportunity for collaboration about important educational topics.

In the case of the PLC, the principal established the group, set the agenda, and facilitated the regular meetings. She described the work of the group as focused on a very specific mathematics topic that was selected based on building level student achievement results. The principal described her leadership role as identifying areas of need based on participant discussion and preparing appropriate materials for the next meeting. On the other hand, either central office administrators or contracted professional development consultants facilitated the cohorts. Principals were not directly responsible for selecting the topics or creating the initial agenda. Principals were, however, responsible for delivering the material to building staff. Based on the feedback from the principals and teacher participants, the training was adapted to meet the participants' needs. Despite the differences in who planned and led the trainings or the terminology used to describe the configurations, principals described both collaborative experiences as valuable.

In addition to the many benefits described, principals also shared concerns about collective participation. Principals identified two primary challenges of participation with colleagues in a cohort. One challenge included the lack of engagement at times by district colleagues in the dialogue, activities, and interaction required for collaborative learning. Another challenge included hesitancy in openly sharing due to a perception of competitiveness among district colleagues. Again, given the hundreds of hours of professional learning experienced by the district principals, it is important to consider their background and previous experiences with professional development. Many contributing factors may influence principals'

decisions to participate fully in professional learning with colleagues. Collective participation is a desired component of professional development for these principals and it may be detrimental to learning when it does not occur. Thus, it is important to establish an environment in which all participants are able to engage in a comfortable, productive way. In the next section, conclusions about and recommendations for collective participation are provided.

### **6.3 COLLECTIVE PARTICIPATION CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Collective participation is identified as a core feature of professional development in Desimone's (2009) framework and the case study findings support the importance of collective participation in principal professional development. The findings further indicate there are many current practices regarding collective participation that would be beneficial to continue, while others could be changed to improve the effectiveness of professional learning for principals. Collective participation also includes many components that would make for interesting areas of future study about professional development. These ideas will be reported in the section below.

Given the positive feedback provided by principals about non-district cohorts, it is recommended that principals be provided with means and opportunity to participate in these collaborative groups. The outside perspective and experiences add favorably to a district team, and they may result in positive gains for the district. Similarly, principals could benefit from the opportunity to collaborate with their district colleagues on a regular basis. Central office administrators are in the position to identify appropriate district and non-district experiences for

principals and could do so as part of a comprehensive professional development plan for each principal.

An important consideration in all professional development experiences is the learning environment. Concerns about principal engagement in an environment conducive to sharing and collaboration could be addressed through administrative intervention. Central office administrators are essential in creating a positive, productive learning environment for principals. They can encourage participation by all principal cohort members, working outside of the cohort with individuals, as necessary, to ensure engagement. This outside work may come in the form of informal discussion or through formal evaluative feedback. Administrators may also facilitate the collaborative nature of the cohort by de-emphasizing situations and scenarios that are competitive in nature. Instead, they might recognize the efforts and contributions of all members. Again, administrators are in the unique role to facilitate an environment in which the contributions of all are expected and valued. The creation of an environment conducive to professional learning and growth is also related to additional findings about the professional development presenter and will be discussed in a later chapter.

One of the most valuable forms of professional growth experienced by principals was through their collaboration with district teachers. Described as a learning partnership rather than as a supervisor-employee relationship, this district cohort configuration is promising as a method of principal professional learning. Administrators can realize benefits for the district through the planning and implementation of similar future structures. In the examples mentioned, the cohorts also included other core features of professional development that would need consideration in future cohorts. Given the mention of the impact on student learning and

achievement, district cohorts including principals and teachers are also recommended as an interesting area of future study for both principal and teacher professional learning.

Similarly, the distinction between a cohort and a professional learning community is another area recommended for additional consideration. While there were many experiences with cohorts reported by principals, only one principal classified a cohort experience as a professional learning community. It would be informative to study the distinctions between the two terms and whether the differences influence the learning experiences of participants. This case study of district principals with a focus on core features did not generate specific information to illuminate the distinction, but additional studies could be focused as such. The core feature of collective participation is a complex one, with input from principals indicating there are several recommended practices as well as additional areas of consideration for professional development planners. Collective participation is one aspect of professional development and is related to other core features including duration, which is described in the next chapter.

## **7.0 CORE FEATURE: DURATION**

The duration of professional development is defined as the length and amount of time over which the professional learning takes place. Duration is recommended to extend over a prolonged period of time in order to allow participants an opportunity to reflect on and implement the new learning (Learning Forward, n.d.). Desimone (2009) defines sufficient duration as lasting a semester and including at least 20 or more hours of contact time. In this chapter, the participants' perceptions of and experiences regarding the duration of professional development will be reported.

### **7.1 DURATION FINDINGS**

While Desimone (2009) identifies duration as a core feature of professional development, few examples from the district principals supported duration as a core feature. One example provided by a district principal did indicate the value of extended professional development. Principal Josh referred to the duration of a professional development when describing a multi-day session on inquiry. He felt the length of the training added positively to the effectiveness of the experience:

They were three-day sessions. I think because of that experience, you couldn't get back to your building. You knew going into this, this is going to be three days. I'm

completely surrounded by this topic. Your distractions were (limited), you are way more focused in that type of setting.

By participating in professional development over a multi-day period of time, this principal described being able to prepare to be away from typical responsibilities with reduced distractions. As indicated in research about other features of professional development, principals are more apt to participate in a professional development experience if it does not interfere with their daily responsibilities (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). This was one example in which the principal felt that a multi-day session was effective; however, many principals shared their feelings that whole day and multi-day trainings are less effective for them.

Moreover, one consistent desire about duration involved the need for ongoing experiences that provided follow-up for participants. Without describing a specific duration, several participants reported their preference for what they described as a cycle of learning, or ongoing professional development. When sharing experiences that have been effective for them, the principals cited specific instances that stood out to them. Principal Faith recalled the value of safety trainings in which the principals participated. She described the ongoing nature of safety training that includes different topics with a consistent focus on safety year after year:

I think what comes into play with the safety trainings is the fact that we repeat them. It's repetitive. It's something we repeat every year so the fact that we revisit it, go over it, and review makes it more effective.

Repetition and review of material, along with the presentation of new material helps to make the safety trainings effective for the principal. As indicated in literature, principals can change and improve practice when provided with the opportunity to learn followed by time to implement

strategies in their daily positions (Joyce & Showers, 1983; Leithwood, et al., 2004). This point is evident as Faith described the value in having time to implement new learning into practice.

Like Faith, Anne acknowledged the value of repetition. Anne referenced three separate professional learning experiences that are revisited regularly within the school district. When talking about the value of these experiences she described her professional growth when given the opportunity to review previously learned material. She shared, “So clearly there is value in shorter sessions, hitting the big ideas, refreshing memory, hearing something over and over again.” In comparing the principal’s experiences to recognized research on duration, Anne agrees with the need for ongoing professional development that extends over time. However, she stated this could occur in brief sessions and may not require a specific amount of time such as 20 hours, as recommended by Desimone (2009). Similarly, in reference to the ongoing formative assessment training which occurred in the district, two principals cited the importance of revisiting the material.

- Principal Sam: It was effective when there were multiple sessions broken out over a course of a year and we were able to take out from it and bring back to the building. It was a cycle that allowed us to keep the ongoing dialogue and that path was open.
- Principal Homer: The formative assessment training allowed us to chunk it out to really develop it and grow it out over time to become experts in it with our teachers.

These examples speak to the value in extending professional development over time and the desire by principals to have opportunity to re-visit topics for follow-up discussion. On-going professional development was a clear preference shared by respondents.

While principals expressed a preference for ongoing professional development experiences, they referenced duration as dependent on other identified core features, particularly on the content of the professional learning. Principals shared their beliefs on duration in relation to other core features.

- Principal Chris: I don't think duration is as important as actual content. If it's a good quality content and you're getting something out of it, it doesn't matter if it's one full day or multiple days or an hour. If it's useful, that's more important to me personally than duration.
- Principal Lee: It depends on the topic because I felt like training on writing Text Dependent Analysis responses could have kept going because it is ever-changing while other topics are more stagnant. Don't just extend it (professional development) because you know it's changing. Make sure you have good new knowledge to give.

In these examples, the principals expressed a willingness to participate in the training because of the importance of the topic, regardless of time required. The principals further expressed that the scheduling of the professional development should align with the release of new information rather than on a set schedule. These examples support the principals' assertion that duration is dependent on other core features of professional development: content and the relevance of content. One central office administrator described the importance of duration similarly:

Duration is important because you want just enough time to get done what you need to get done, accomplish a few tasks but you're left wanting more. After it (professional development), you can go back to the building, go deeper and stick with it for a little longer. That makes the most effective professional development.

In the example, the administrator refers to the duration as dependent on the content and activities associated with the training. When asked to report on the relationship between duration and their professional development, principals shared a wide variety of perceptions and experiences. While research recommends extended professional development experiences, district principals reported positive experiences in structures from 30-minute sessions to multi-year, ongoing professional learning programs.

Principals offered several suggestions for how to make the learning experience more effective based on the duration. These suggestions included:

- Structuring a full day training with information sharing in the morning followed by application and simulation in the afternoon
- Scheduling a short session followed by time to implement and then return for feedback and follow-up in another short session
- Scheduling several short sessions over the course of a few weeks rather than a whole day or several days in a row
- Holding sessions during the summer when no students and teachers are in the building

In each case, the principals describing optimal conditions for duration of professional learning shared a common idea. The principals reiterated the need for professional development to extend over a period of time, with opportunities for follow-up and feedback. Further, the principals expressed a need to get back to their buildings for daily responsibilities as quickly as possible. These findings are consistent with research on effective professional learning for principals. As indicated by the respondents, duration of professional development is somewhat dependent on other core features of professional development.

## 7.2 DURATION DISCUSSION

Principals provided valuable insight in relation to the research questions about the importance of duration of professional development and the relationship between duration and their experiences. The most notable finding was that principals believed duration to be dependent on other features rather than a core feature on its own. Principals were able to provide several examples demonstrating the dependent relationship between duration and other core features. Primarily, when asked for preferences or recommendations about duration of professional development, principals first discussed the content of a session and then described the experiences they had before talking about features of duration. Compared to the content and learning activities, the principals described duration as less important.

Principals supported one aspect of duration: professional development should be ongoing. They cited opportunities to learn, implement, and receive feedback. Principals expressed the benefits of meeting over time, even if each experience was brief, in order to revisit previous material and learn new material. Principals described a cycle of learning principals related to other core features of professional development including active learning and collective participation.

Principals made several valuable suggestions for future professional development scheduling: for professional development to extend over a period of time, with opportunities for follow-up and feedback; flexibility for principals to get back to their buildings for daily responsibilities as quickly as possible; or schedule PD when students and teachers not in the building. These suggestions are aligned to recommended practices for professional development and are informative to central office administrators who schedule professional learning experiences (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Joyce & Showers, 1983; Leithwood, et al., 2004).

If scheduled with respect to principal preferences, future professional development has the potential to be more effective for participants.

### **7.3 DISCUSSION CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Duration was the only feature in Desimone's framework that was not identified by principals as a core feature of professional development. Principals identified duration as important but secondary to other features of professional development. Thus, when scheduling professional development for principals, it is important to consider duration in relation to the other features. It would be important for administrators and those who schedule professional development to pay close attention to the quality of other core features rather than attempt to meet a threshold of a set number of hours.

Several variables can be considered when scheduling a professional development experience that will meet the recommended schedule of multiple sessions over an extended period of time to allow for implementation, feedback, and follow-up. The variables include: the number of sessions, the period of time, and the length of each session. Duration variables are relative to the content itself and the delivery to principals. The variables could be determined as appropriate for each professional development experience rather than based on a pre-determined set of guidelines. While the principals believe that duration impacts the professional development experience, its impact is based on several other core features. Central office administrators could certainly consider duration as part of an overall plan for professional development, making decisions based on the district's and principals' needs.

The final core feature coherence refers to the alignment between the professional development and the participant. This core feature will be reported in the next chapter.

## **8.0 CORE FEATURE: COHERENCE**

As defined by Desimone (2009), coherence is the consistency among professional learning, participants' knowledge and beliefs, and relevant local, state, and federal initiatives. Adult learners are motivated to learn when the content and experience is aligned to their own needs and interests (Knowles, 1984; Speck, 1996). This chapter reports the principals' professional development perceptions and experiences in regard to the core feature coherence.

### **8.1 COHERENCE FINDINGS**

Principals and administrators responded about the importance of coherence in professional development and their experiences with coherence in professional learning. District principals reported coherence as essential for effective professional development. They shared a high level of interest in professional development aligned with the initiatives from the federal government, Pennsylvania Department of Education, and local school district. Principals reported prioritizing and appreciating learning experiences aligned to local, state, and federal learning initiatives and goals. Similarly, central office administrators reported identifying for principals the relevant local, state, and federal initiatives as areas of focus for learning and development for all professional employees. Administrators described their role as capturing all the relevant

initiatives and synthesizing them into a cohesive plan for the principals. Simply stated by one central office administrator:

Professional development has to apply to the district goals, the building goals, and the teacher goals. That all has to be in line and we all have to be rowing in the same direction. We can't be doing something different.

The administrator's statement reflects the importance of coherence among mandates, personnel, and learning initiatives present in the district. Principals, in turn, focus intently on the professional development necessary for their staff members in their respective buildings. Principals reiterated the importance of coherence in their professional development experiences. In each case, the principals focused primarily on alignment among the district, their building, and themselves:

- Principal Chris: "The professional development has to be congruent with the mission and the vision of the district, in the building, and therefore me, as well. Everything needs to be aligned."
- Principal Sam: "I need professional development to be job-embedded and consistent with the goal of the district or my building. I think it is important we have one voice. Because if I am delivering a different message than (another principal), then we are going to have mixed messages and then that muddies the water."

Given the district's role in identifying over-arching goals and professional development plans, the principals focused primarily on the coherence among the district, their building, and themselves. However, four principals also mentioned Act 45 – a Pennsylvania state requirement for professional development - as an important consideration. Pennsylvania Act 45 of 2007 outlined the requirements for continuing professional education for school or system leaders

specifically focused on the Pennsylvania school leadership standards and based on content designed to impact student achievement (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.-b). Also referred to as PIL courses, or NISL courses, by principals, these Act 45 courses reference the curriculum used in the required courses. Principals reported learning relevant content and opportunities for collective engagement in meaningful learning activities; however, the principals reported selecting and participating in the courses primarily because of the coherence to state mandates.

Principal Chris shared his views on participation in professional development courses that meet the content requirements for Act 45 credits:

Currently, I'm going to be honest, one of my main factors is if they offer PIL hours.

That's a requirement for me. There's very little opportunities, in my opinion, to get PIL hours at this point. So you're almost forced to grab them when you can.

Recognizing this as a need for themselves and their colleagues, several principals suggested the benefit of the school district providing opportunities eligible for Act 45 credit in order to assist the principals in earning their required hours.

Another example of professional development aligned to state mandates is annual professional development on data analysis. For example, principals engage annually in student data collection and analysis of data from standardized assessments that are required by federal and state mandates. Principals use the data to determine goals, action plans, and professional development opportunities specific to their personnel and buildings. Additionally, administrators evaluate principals on the principals' ability to complete these tasks successfully. Principals engage in professional development provided by the district and outside sources first to identify areas of strength and need, and then to provide professional development to staff members on the

identified areas. The principals reported instances when they first needed to learn content and/or processes in order to be able to share the information with their staff. Thus, the needs of the building personnel often drive the professional development experiences of the principals. Principal Anne described this experience in reference to the math PLC she led:

So my learning curve was extremely steep and I had to speak the language very quickly. I was proud of what I learned. But I was motivated to do all of that because there was a need in the building.

Anne's comments reflect the coherence among her professional development, the needs of the building, and relevant mandates. In the same way, other principals reported the motivation for their own professional development as a response to the need to share specific information with their building personnel. These findings reflect the literature that names coherence as a core feature as well as the principals' assertion of coherence as an important component of professional development (Desimone, 2009).

Two principals further expanded on the notion of professional development coherence and consistency by describing the importance of situating a focus on all learning that relates to the core values of the school district. Principal James identified ideal professional development based on "Core principles that never change; you're always working on (them). You can have changing cyclical initiatives if they're connected back to your core values." This example speaks to more than just the consistency that often occurs with changing initiatives from local, state, or federal entities. Instead, the reference to "core principles" speaks to the importance of cohesion among the district, its employees, and professional development initiatives year after year. James referenced his experience in another school district where this model was particularly evident and successful. From his perspective, an increased focus on core values and

a decreased focus on specific professional development initiatives would be more effective. James's perspective is supported by research on professional development that is regularly and systematically aligned to consistent beliefs and goals and evaluated for effectiveness (Schmoker, 2004).

Central office administrators and principals shared a consensual belief in the importance of coherence as a core feature of professional development. Administrators described their role in planning and implementing coherent professional development, and principals reiterated their desire to support the district goals during their learning and when guiding the learning of others. Principals shared several examples supporting the importance of coherent professional development. These findings are discussed in more detail below.

## **8.2 COHERENCE DISCUSSION**

In response to the interview questions, participants shared several perceptions of and experiences related to the coherence of professional development. Principals reported that the coherence of professional development is an important characteristic of professional development. Principals view themselves as part of a comprehensive district structure. They describe wanting to align their individual professional goals and building level goals, including those goals centered on professional learning, to the overall goals of the district. This has positive implications for the school district because coherence in goals means that all principals will be working toward a common objective. Principals do not identify independently with the larger context of state and federal mandates. Perhaps this is because central office administration considers identifying

district areas of focus aligned to federal and state mandates as their responsibility. Principals, in turn, identify focused, appropriate goals aligned to the district goals and objectives.

Principals see their role as serving as the conduit of information from central administration, and by extension the state and federal government, to the teachers and staff. Principals recognize their unique role in professional development. They define this role as both a learner and a teacher. The principals often described situations in which they needed to learn something and immediately present it to a group of teachers, given a time-sensitive need for the teachers to know the information. Again, this established environment has positive implications for professional learning in the school district. Principals operate as part of a consistent district structure and adopt the goals of the district as their own. With this structure in place, administrators can work with principals to provide required, relevant professional development across the district. It is important to consider the role of the principals in this professional development structure and how their own learning may impact the learning of others. Further, consideration must be given to providing ample time and support to principals' learning so they may gain the knowledge and confidence needed to share professional learning with others. This is important because principals are an important part of the district professional development structure and often lead professional learning experiences.

Based on the principals' input, another consideration for administrators is how to support principals in earning professional learning hours to meet Act 45 requirements. Central office administrators are in the position to identify or provide opportunities for principals that meet their learning needs and preferences, including state requirements for professional development. Doing so would address principal concerns related to the coherence of professional development and would help them to complete state and federal requirements.

District principals shared one additional idea for improving the coherence of professional development. Three principals described their perceptions that the district at times moves from one professional development initiative to another and lacks in maintaining focus. One principal spoke of the need for a set of consistent core values as the foundation of professional development. His views, similar to recommended practices for professional development, support greater consistency in core beliefs and goals (Schmoker, 2004). Administrators are positioned to establish and maintain coherence between professional development and relevant mandates, as well as to ensure coherence in focus across school years. As described by one central office administrator, the process of Comprehensive Planning for school districts includes identification of belief statements, mission, vision, and a professional development plan. Each school district completes a Comprehensive Plan every three years based on relevant district data. The information provides the framework for a coherent professional development plan grounded in core values and beliefs. Based on principal input, there is strong support for coherence in professional development and opportunities to improve professional learning through the District Comprehensive Plan.

### **8.3 COHERENCE CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings from this case study reflect the importance of coherence in professional development to meet the professional learning needs of principals. There are several practices that would help to meet the professional development preferences and experiences of principals. These recommendations are explained in the upcoming paragraphs.

Based on the findings from principals, the current structure in which professional development priorities are established through administration, principals, and teachers is effective. Principals shared concerns about two aspects of their professional development that administrators are positioned to address. First, as part of regular goal-setting with principals, administrators could help to ensure that principals have ample time to learn and feel confident with new initiatives before having to share the information with staff. While talking about their experiences, several principals spoke to the need for learning and teaching information simultaneously. They mentioned their desire to feel confident with information when presenting to other personnel. Principals seemed to accept this arrangement and did not speak about it in a negative way. However, it is important to consider that their responses could have been tempered because they were reporting to a central office administrator. Because several principals mentioned the experience of teaching and learning simultaneously, it is recommended as an area for future consideration by administrators.

Additionally, while administration works to provide direction linking federal, state, and local mandates to district priority areas, this work must align with the written and shared goals of the district Comprehensive Plan. Principals reported concerns about a lack of consistent focus about some aspects of professional development. Increased participation by principals with comprehensive planning may provide opportunities for discussion about the district's core values, vision, and mission. Additionally, increased communication about the Comprehensive Plan may help stakeholders, including district principals, to see ongoing alignment within professional development focus areas. A more intentional rationale that situates initiatives within the current Comprehensive Plan could be highlighted when sharing new initiatives with the principals. This approach to professional development initiatives is recommended as a

strategy to avoid shifting, disjointed, or incoherent goals and learning for professionals (Schmoker, 2014). While there are recommendations in regard to this finding, it would be interesting to learn more about the relationship between district professional development and Comprehensive Planning. This is another area related to professional learning worthy of future consideration.

Moreover, principals shared additional input about features that impact the effectiveness of professional development, beyond the five core features identified by Desimone (2009). In the upcoming chapter, principals' perceptions and experiences about these features will be presented.

## **9.0 BEYOND THE CORE FEATURES**

District principals reported their perceptions of and experiences with the five core features of professional development as identified in Desimone's conceptual framework (2009). Examples provided by the principals demonstrated the importance of the core features in effective professional development experiences. Principals suggested additional features they deemed important to their learning experiences. Those features suggested by principals are detailed in the next sections.

### **9.1 BEYOND THE CORE FEATURES FINDINGS: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PRESENTER**

One feature of professional development mentioned by district principals, yet not included as one of the core features identified by Desimone, was the role of the presenter/facilitator. District principals regarded the professional development presenter as a key feature that influences the effectiveness of the experience. Six of the ten principals reported the presenter as important to the effectiveness of a professional development experience. Desimone likewise identified the presenter as "a potentially important component not included in the base model" (2009, p. 186) and suggested it as an area of future study. Further research into the role of the presenter yielded somewhat limited, yet consistent, results. As one representative example in A Framework for

Professional Development, indicators of effectiveness related to the presenter included: “Expert presenters are respectful of, and responsive to, adult learning needs and delivery is predominantly facilitative and interactive” (New York State Education Department, n.d., p. 9).

District principals identified several qualities of an effective presenter. To them, an effective presenter is: personable, passionate, knowledgeable, and professional. According to the participants, the presenter’s actions and interactions impact the principals’ professional development experience.

- Principal Sarah: “I think the most memorable experiences were when the presenters were engaging, when they made an effort to get to know you on a personal basis.
- Principal Lee: “The presenter has to show their passion, that this topic means something to them. When I feel the PD presenter is meeting me at my level that makes it most effective.”
- Principal Chris: “The presenter needs to be knowledgeable and have a reputation of being an expert; no ‘canned speeches’ – the presenter has to personalize it for the audience.”
- Principal Sam: “The presenter needs to be a professional in what they’re trying to deliver because what we take from that then we want to make sure it is of the utmost importance and is accurate information. If we’re going to sell it to someone else we need to make sure we’re receiving good information.”

These preferred characteristics are consistent with research that explains the importance of the professional development presenter in meeting the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of principals as adult learners (Merriam, 2008). Principals described the need to receive accurate

information from a recognized professional. They also appreciated the presenter's role in personalizing the learning to meet their individual needs.

From their descriptions, the principals value the role of the presenter in professional development. Correspondingly, central office administrators reported the importance of the presenter in effective professional development. Administrator John explained his perceptions regarding a recent district initiative and the choice to use a recognized expert in the field.

When we talk about educational research and what is good in terms of connecting theory to actual practice, I think there is that important point in time when you bring somebody on board like [name of expert]. With all of her research and her extensive practical background as a curriculum specialist, that becomes an integral part of effective professional learning.

Corroborating Administrator John's comments, Administrator Thomas spoke to the importance of an expert presenter as part of a district's professional development initiatives. He described the value of a knowledgeable presenter who is able to answer the most difficult questions and validates the district's focus on the professional development choice. These examples reinforce Desimone's (2009) suggestion that the presenter of professional development is worthy of further consideration as a core feature.

In addition to preferred characteristics of the presenter, the respondents elaborated further on the role of the professional development presenter as the creator of a positive, safe learning environment necessary for learning experiences. Principals described the importance of the presenter in facilitating an environment conducive to learning. For example, Principal Sarah explained:

The presenter is important in creating a positive environment in which people develop a level of comfort because they are getting positive feedback. Pointed responses and overly critical assessments make the experience less effective and make me less willing to share. Sarah's comment aligns with literature citing the important role of the presenter in creating a positive learning environment for participants ((New York State Education Department, n.d.). Principal James spoke specifically to his need for what he described as a "partnership" with a professional development presenter. James explained that effective professional development includes, "Learning with somebody I feel I trusted and I feel like they had been around." James's comments again elucidate the importance of the presenter's influence on the learning atmosphere and participants' experiences in professional learning (Mezirow, 2000).

Principals additionally described negative experiences created by professional development presenters. Situations in which the presenter made an effort to develop a positive, comfortable environment were appreciated in place of a negative environment that inhibited sharing. Principals shared several examples of presenter behaviors contributing to an ineffective learning environment:

- Posing "gotcha" questions
- Putting participants on the spot or "attacking" them
- Using self-deprecating humor to avoid difficult questions or unfamiliar material

The principals described these actions as unnecessary and uncomfortable in professional development. These behaviors inhibit the principals' ability to engage in learning. Principals described appreciation for presenters who are personable, passionate, knowledgeable, and professional, and for presenters who use these qualities to create an environment conducive to learning. The views of district principals align with the research on presenter's role in creating a

safe, judgment-free professional learning environment (Mezirow, 2000; New York State Education Department, n.d.).

While not included in the core features of professional development, district principals reported the presenter as a key component of professional development and further provided several examples of the importance of the presenter in relation to their experiences. There was consistency between the reports of principals and central office administrators about the role of the presenter in professional development. This finding indicates the importance of the presenter in professional learning experiences and will be discussed further in subsequent sections.

## **9.2 BEYOND THE CORE FEATURES FINDINGS: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MATERIALS**

Several principals reflected on the importance of the materials that are provided as part of professional development. They noted that the presence and quality of materials impacts practice. Desimone (2009) identifies curriculum materials as a potentially important component but one that has not been subject to much research. While it is not included as one of the five core components of professional development, it is worthy of inclusion in the findings because of the input provided by three respondents.

Principal Sarah described her experience with a district-provided professional development initiative and her use of the information distributed long after the training ended. Sarah observed the facilitator modeling recommended practices and received relevant resources. She further described her continued use of the resources several years after receiving the training:

I will still go and pull my portfolio of formative assessment off the shelf and look at it. It helps me when I am giving feedback to teachers. I use it a good bit. So that was a situation where I had limited exposure to the content and now I feel pretty masterful with giving formative feedback to teachers.

Sarah referenced the importance of the materials provided in supporting the ongoing use of information acquired in professional learning. Principal Chris shared a similar reflection:

I like when I get actually not only useful information and content but also materials. If there's a template or something I can use to organize what I'm learning and teachers are learning, I'd like to take that back. It is useful when you have a tangible product that you can show them (teachers) and how to use it.

Another principal, Faith, referenced the Resource Binder provided during Student Assistance Program (SAP) professional development as something that “sticks out” in terms of how the professional development has impacted her professionally. She describes, “Just having that at my fingertips and having agencies and different information has been very helpful.” While research supports the importance of ongoing professional learning, the principals reported the importance of having materials and resources from the sessions as particularly impactful. Principals describe revisiting the materials and using them daily in practice. The findings support the idea proposing curriculum materials as a potential core feature of professional development in Desimone's (2009) framework. Both the professional development presenter and curriculum materials will be discussed in the section below.

### 9.3 BEYOND THE CORE FEATURES DISCUSSION

In response to the first two research questions, participants clearly indicated that the presenter of professional development and materials provided during the experience are important considerations in regard to the effectiveness of professional development. When describing the role of the presenter in relation to their professional learning experiences, principals reported two considerations: the personal characteristics of the presenter and the presenter's role in creating the learning environment. Principals described preferred characteristics, including a presenter who is knowledgeable, professional, passionate, and personable. They also preferred an environment conducive to learning, free of negativity from the presenter or other participants.

Similar to the way principals reported the importance of learning relevant content, many principals identified their professional development experiences based on the presenter of the experience. Principals associated the content, activities, and experiences back to the session facilitator. They seemed to report the quality of the experience in direct relation to their perception of the quality of the presenter. The presenter is connected to other core features of professional development including content, active learning, collective participation, duration, and coherence; however, principals seemed to perceive that the presenter controlled those other features to a certain extent, thus, controlling the effectiveness of the experience. Based on the information provided by district principals, the professional development presenter seems to be a feature that is comparable to other core features. Thus, similar to Desimone's (2009) findings, the professional development presenter is an important consideration for districts and individuals who plan and present professional development.

Similarly, principals valued the materials provided in professional learning and reported their importance in determining the effectiveness of the experience. While materials were

mentioned by several principals as important, they do seem to be dependent on other core features of professional development rather than an independent core feature. Principals mentioned the materials in reference to the session content, learning activities, or presenter, rather than as independent features. As indicated in Desimone's (2009) research, there is clearly value in effective materials to support and sustain professional learning of principals. Ample consideration should be given to the role of materials.

Based on this input, both presenters and materials should be considered in recommendations about professional development. These recommendations are included in the next section.

#### **9.4 BEYOND THE CORE FEATURES CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings from this case study demonstrate the need for consideration of certain features of professional development in addition to those features identified in the core framework. Principals provided input about the importance of the presenter and materials in relation to a professional development experience. These features were analyzed similarly to other core features and recommendations about these features will be explained in the upcoming paragraphs.

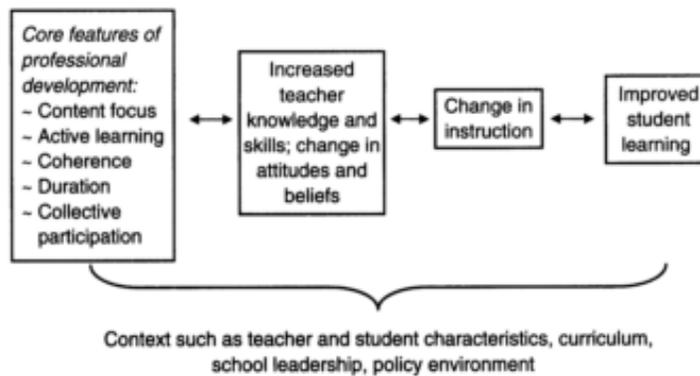
Similar to other identified core features, administrators are able to increase the likelihood of finding presenters and materials that meet desired requirements through the process of planning, selecting, and evaluating professional development. Professional development presenters can be interviewed or asked to submit materials ahead of time to determine if their

personality and qualifications are a match for the district. Moreover, they can be contracted on a trial basis, pending formal and informal feedback from central office administrators and principals. One additional consideration should be the materials that will be provided during and following the experience. When working with principals to identify professional learning opportunities, administrators can help to match principals with appropriate experiences, by considering the presenter of and materials from the learning session.

The principals' input on the importance of the presenter and materials was aligned with Desimone's (2009) contribution of these factors as worthy of additional consideration. Given this alignment, I recommend these two areas as future areas of consideration about principal professional development. Additional study of the factors may yield valuable information about their relation to and impact on professional development. Each of the core features of professional development was studied in relation to its importance and impact on professional learning of principals. In the next section, the impact of those professional development experiences will be discussed.

## **10.0 CORE CONCEPTUAL MODEL – CAUSAL CHAIN**

In combination with the set of five core features, Desimone (2009) recognized earlier research on frameworks of evaluation and suggested the need to establish an operational theory defining the relationship between professional development and teacher and student outcomes. In a proposed core conceptual framework model, she presented a causal chain linking four components: professional development; increased teacher knowledge, skills, and changes in beliefs; changes in instruction; and, as a result, improved student learning. Her theory proposed that influences in the initial component of professional development cause changes in subsequent components. Guided by this framework, Desimone refuted earlier statements indicating that we do not have ample evidence to connect professional development with student learning outcomes (Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008). Figure 1 depicts the Core Conceptual Framework as proposed by Desimone.



**Figure 1.** Desimone's Core Conceptual Framework

Desimone's framework was developed to represent a relationship applicable to teacher professional development. For this case study, Desimone's core conceptual framework was utilized to determine if principals experience a similar relationship among the components. Specifically, principals shared their perceptions of the impact of their professional development experiences on their professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice to gather information in response to the third research question: How do principals view the impact of their professional development experiences on their professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice?

Each of the ten principal participants responded positively when asked about the impact of professional development on their knowledge, attitudes, and practice. Principals reported that they have experienced professional learning that has directly impacted their professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice. While participants were not asked specifically about the impact of professional development on student learning and achievement, several responses alluded to the relationship between the two as Desimone mentioned (2009). The perceptions and experiences of principals are reported, with representative examples, in the upcoming paragraphs.

Principal James summarized his understanding of the effect of professional development: “The ideal outcome of PD would be that I would not just have a tool in my toolbox but I would be changed either in how I view something or how I am able to handle or be an expert in certain areas.” James reported a desired relationship between learning and desired outcomes that is similar to Desimone’s (2009) causal chain.

Principals reported needing a combination of both theory and application throughout professional development in order to realize an ideal outcome or impact on knowledge, attitude, and/or practice. They reported disappointment with professional development grounded solely in theory or philosophical information. This aligns with literature that recommends combining the acquisition of academic knowledge and theory with the opportunity for practical experience in effective professional learning (Lashway, 2003).

Five principals provided detailed examples of experiences in which their participation in professional learning led to a change in their knowledge, attitudes, and practice. These examples will be shared in the upcoming sections.

## **10.1 CAUSAL CHAIN FINDINGS**

Examples shared by five of the principals illustrate their thoughts on the impact of professional development on their knowledge, attitudes, and practice. In the first example, Principal Lee recalled a professional development experience early in her principal career that was particularly impactful. A leadership team including central office administrators and teachers attended a multi-day experience, visiting Gettysburg battlefields and learning about leadership through the lens of the Civil War Battle of Gettysburg. The principal described an opportunity to learn about

various leadership decisions made by the military leaders during The Battle of Gettysburg. Lee further described the opportunity to connect leadership decisions made on the battlefield with decision-making and experiences faced everyday as a principal in the building. While the experience occurred almost five years ago, Lee believes it continues to influence decision-making in her principal position. Particularly impactful to Lee was: “Coming back, being able to use my learning about leadership from the experience with my staff, seeing them using it, and benefitting the students.”

To understand its impact, the principal was asked to reflect on the features of the experience. While describing the experience, Lee identified components of each of the five core features of professional development as present in the Gettysburg example. First, she described the content as relevant to her position. A content focus on leadership aligns with research suggesting appropriate content focus for principal professional learning (Mitgang, 2012). Next, active learning occurred through readings prior to the experience, walking the battlefield, hearing about leadership actions and decisions from the tour guides, and discussing leadership actions and decision-making relative to a principal position with other administrators. The core features of coherence, duration, and collective participation were also present as Lee had the opportunity to spend multiple days immersed in the learning, collaborating with district colleagues to enhance leadership skills. This exemplifies an experience that incorporated the five core features of professional development and that was described as having an impact on a principal’s knowledge, attitude, and practice. Lee’s experience aligns with the causal chain proposed by Desimone (2009) in professional development research.

In another example, Principal Anne recalls the importance of a professional learning experience focused on a new observation process. During the course of several sessions, the

principal recalls reviewing de-identified observations completed by herself and her peers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each. Anne described the purpose of the activity as improving feedback to teachers and helping to create inter-rater reliability among district evaluators. The five core features of professional development were present in the experience as indicated by Anne. The professional development focused on important content aligned to district goals, provided principals with a chance to work on real-life examples with their colleagues, and extended over several sessions during a period of one year. Principal Anne described her professional growth following participation in this professional learning:

Knowing that I was doing it in a real life setting, for a real purpose for teachers that I cared about and with colleagues whose work was also being read by some of the teachers, there was an immediacy to that activity that was very impactful to me.

Anne's reflection indicates her view on the impact of the professional development on her professional position. In sum, Anne recognized the value of the experience that incorporated the five core features of professional development. This aligns with Desimone's (2009) framework and accompanying causal chain.

Another example provided by Principal James reported the impact of professional development that took place on Student Learning Objectives (SLOs). As part of a new observation and evaluation model, principals and teachers were required to write SLOs to measure student performance in a selected area. Principals engaged in training and used supporting materials to facilitate the process of writing SLOs. After learning the process themselves, the principals shared the information with teachers during several sessions throughout the school year. A component of the experience, which was similar to one mentioned by many principals regarding other professional development experiences, was the need to learn

information while simultaneously sharing it with teachers. Principal James described the process of his growth from the experience: “Going from knowing about them [SLOs], and in two years feeling very comfortable with them.” The principal described sharing information with large groups of teachers followed by the chance to work with specific individuals and small groups of teachers. James described the learning activities that took place with teachers including, “reading, checking, and talking,” as the experiences which have impacted his practice. James explained, “I’ve grown the ability to give feedback on their progress in certain areas” after participating in the professional learning experience.

In comparing this experience to the core features of professional development, the experience included all five core features according to Desimone’s (2009) framework. The content was timely and necessary for all educators, and included opportunities for participants to work actively and collaboratively. Educators worked together over an extended time to meet goals aligned with state and district expectations. With the five core features present, James described resultant changes in his knowledge and practice.

The preceding examples are all representative of professional development provided by the school district. Additional instances of impactful professional learning provided by non-district entities are highlighted in the upcoming examples.

Principal Homer recalled impactful professional learning experiences through a local Principals’ Academy. He described his participation as, “having a big impact on some things that I look at differently now than I used to.” The Principals’ Academy included a cohort of principals from across the local area who attended monthly meetings during a two-year period, listened to guest speakers, participated in instruction on educational strategies, and discussed relevant topics with other principals. Homer reported the “open mike” portion of each session as

one of the most important activities because of the opportunity to, “discuss issues or problems each district was facing and to see how other districts were handling things.” Homer described the learning in the following way:

The Principals’ Academy always had things that were applicable to me, things that I could use and bring back and try to implement in the building or things I could use for my personal growth over time to develop myself as a better administrator.

Similar to previous examples, the core features were identified as present in the professional development experience, and Homer described the experience as one which stands out as particularly effective. Reflecting on his participation in the experience and subsequent impact, the principal identified the biggest change he experienced: “I’ve probably become more gray than black and white, realizing that you’re not going to survive in this business if you’re black and white.” Administrator Thomas likewise reported this experience as one about which he had received feedback from principals about the effectiveness of the professional learning. These examples are consistent with Desimone’s (2009) framework and causal chain of professional development because they included the five core features of professional development and impacted professional knowledge, attitude, and practice.

In another example, Principal Faith described a multi-day professional learning experience that was impactful. Each building principal is required to participate as a member of the building’s Student Assistance Program (SAP). To qualify as a member of the team, participants, including principals or teachers, must first attend a three-day training. The principal recalls participating in the training as a teacher while completing a principal internship program. The training included “a nice balance of whole group, small group, and individual activities” to help participants learn how to function as SAP team members. Activities included simulations

of team discussions, meetings, and paperwork along with examples of how other districts conduct the program. Faith describes the importance of the training for her as a school principal: “I have applied the information in different capacities, as a teacher and now as a principal, and now it’s come full circle to where I am using it almost daily.” In describing thoughts on effective professional development, the principal cited the Student Assistance Program example as one that included core features of professional learning. The content “fulfilled the need for new information for what I was trying to learn,” and it aligned with the goals of the district and building. Moreover, the training was planned over an extended time period and encouraged active and collective participation by attendees. Similar to other examples from principals, Faith reported that the training directly influenced her subsequent knowledge and practice. When describing the experience, Faith referenced each of the core features of professional development and reported an experience that aligns with Desimone’s (2009) causal chain.

District principals shared several examples of experiences in which they believed participation in professional development influenced their professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice. In describing the features of the professional development that impacted the outcomes, principals cited the core features of professional development as important.

Central office administrators similarly reported that they have experience with professional development that impacted professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice. Administrator John described impactful professional development as having the following features: job-embedded assignments with relevance to your daily position, ongoing sessions with follow-up, and opportunity to work collaboratively with peers and supervisors on tasks aligned to district goals and objectives. He referenced each of the five core features of professional development as proposed by Desimone (2009). Administrator John further offered

that he believes the ultimate success or failure of a professional development experience is measured by its impact on student achievement and student outcomes. While not referencing a specific experience as impactful, John provided features and expectations consistent with the Desimone's (2009) framework and causal chain. In subsequent sections, the perceptions and experiences of participants will be discussed and recommendations for future practice and areas of study will be provided.

## **10.2 CAUSAL CHAIN DISCUSSION**

Principals shared their perceptions of and experiences with professional development so that I could understand how they view the impact of their professional development experiences on their professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice. Principals believe that some, but not all, professional development impacts their knowledge, attitudes, and practice. It is especially important to understand the experiences that impact professionals, and several examples are offered in Chapter 10. In each case, all five core features were identified as part of the impactful experience described by the principal. This supports Desimone's (2009) assertion that all five core features must be present for professional learning to be effective.

After reviewing participants' responses, additional questions about a specific professional learning example may have yielded greater detail about its core features and impact. While all ten participants answered favorably about the impact of professional development on professional knowledge, attitude, and practice, only half of the respondents provided an example with specific detail to support Desimone's assertion. Two factors were considered in relation to the information. The first is that respondents may not have been asked appropriate prompting

questions to elicit the information. Respondents were asked to describe impactful professional development experiences, but increased probing about how the experience impacted them may have garnered additional information. The second consideration is that respondents may have provided a favorable response as an expected response without actually having experienced a specific event to support their assertion. Given the hierarchical relationship that exists between the principals and me it is possible that they may want to provide a favorable response. This is important to consider as part of the overall data shared by principals.

Moreover, while Desimone's causal chain refers to teacher professional development, in this case study it is being used to understand principal professional development. The causal chain proposes that professional development impacts knowledge, attitudes, practice, and potentially student achievement. While not specifically asked about the impact of their professional development on student learning and achievement, some principals briefly mentioned a positive impact on student learning and achievement following professional development. This finding is worth noting as a potential future area of consideration and will be discussed along with other recommendations in the next section.

### **10.3 CAUSAL CHAIN CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Given the input from principals about the potential impact of professional development on professional knowledge, attitudes, practice, and student achievement, I have identified recommendations for the school district as well as potential for future areas of consideration.

Several examples demonstrate the value of professional development that embodies the recommended core features. As administrators identify and plan professional development,

consideration should be given to experiences that incorporate the core features of professional learning. Intentional planning and selection through a comprehensive process, as indicated as important in previous chapters, is the strongest recommendation for improving the professional development experiences of principals.

While much of the discussion about the impact of professional development focused on knowledge, attitudes, and practice jointly, it would be informative to study each of these areas individually in relation to a professional development experience or experiences. This would provide greater insight into the causal chain proposed by Desimone (2009) and may indicate how some features or experiences may impact either knowledge, attitudes, or practice to a greater or lesser degree than others. Additionally, administrators could conduct a follow-up study on the impact of a specific professional development experience, meeting the criteria of all five core features, on student achievement. While it may be difficult to isolate one initiative or professional development event from other related school improvement efforts, it would be an interesting and informative area of future study for the participating school district or other school districts interested in the impact of principal professional development.

The responses of participants indicate that professional development directly impacts professional knowledge, attitudes, and practice. As stated by Central office Administrator John, “There isn’t anything more important than professional development in the growth of all educators.” His sentiment mirrors the views of the district principals who appreciate quality professional development to support their own learning and the learning of others, including teachers and students.

## **11.0 PERSONAL REFLECTION AND PROFESSIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

As a central office administrator, planning and facilitating professional development is one of the most important responsibilities of my position. In determining a topic for a dissertation, my identity as a practitioner led me to the topic of professional development. Through discussion and deliberation with colleagues, study group members, my advisor and committee members, I decided to conduct case study research on the professional learning perceptions and experiences of my district's principals and central office administrators. What I have discovered has been tremendously informative and impactful to me as a scholar and practitioner. Through this process of learning about the perceptions and experiences of others, I found myself also considering my own perceptions of and experiences with professional development. Primarily, I reflected on how I learned through the professional development experience of writing a dissertation and how my experience compares to the experiences of my district colleagues. As part of the learning experience, I also considered the implications for professional practice, further inquiry, and educational policy.

## 11.1 PERSONAL REFLECTION

The process of writing a dissertation has been an opportunity for professional growth, unlike any previous professional development experience. When reflecting on my experience, I naturally began to consider the experience in terms of Desimone's (2009) conceptual framework that identifies the core features of professional development. Based on the framework and the findings from my research, professional development is effective if it includes the five identified core features: content, active learning, collective participation, duration, and coherence. This section explains my experience in relation to the five core features of professional learning.

The first core feature of content was essential in my experience. I selected a focus on professional development because of my personal interest in the topic. As an educator, I have always valued professional development and believe it contributes to the effectiveness of teaching and learning. With changing goals and expectations, educators are continually challenged to adapt and learn new information and strategies to meet the needs of students and their positions. I was very interested to discover how the principals in my district have experienced professional development. With professional development as the focus, the content I experienced was immediately relevant to my current position. Similar to the perceptions and experiences of the principals, I find professional development content that immediately informs practice to be essential in professional learning. Knowing that I could grow as a learner and educator, while also being able to contribute to my district and the people whom I supervise, made the content of my dissertation and the learning experience very significant to me. The content of professional development is key in providing a focus around which all aspects of the learning can be planned.

The second core feature, active learning, was present and added favorably to my experience. The process of conducting a research study and writing a dissertation involved many active learning opportunities. Through coursework, I learned about various types of research and read samples of research studies. I analyzed and critiqued those studies and even planned several of my own “pilot” studies. Instructors provided feedback on my plans that ultimately strengthened my subsequent work. To meet course requirements on two occasions, I completed the Institutional Review Board process in order to conduct the pilot studies. Thus, when planning my own study, I had experience with exactly the type work that would need to be done. I selected methodology that included interviewing and analyzing data from my colleagues. Having the opportunity to talk with my district colleagues and learn about their experiences was an incredibly valuable part of the experience. After recording my ideas, I was anxious to share my drafts with others and receive feedback. This process actively engaged me in a critical review of my work and ultimately increased my learning. The active learning experiences I engaged in as part of the process of writing a dissertation provided authentic, job-embedded professional learning. This experience enabled me to actively participate in my own learning and facilitate my own professional growth.

As I discovered in hearing the perceptions and experiences of my colleagues, active learning often overlaps with the third core feature, collective participation. The opportunity to work collaboratively with others on portions of the work enriched my learning experience. Interaction with others prompted my own professional reflection and growth. Several individuals and groups, including my advisor, study group, dissertation committee, and professional colleagues, contributed to the findings I have presented here. I cannot imagine that the dissertation would have been nearly as informative or comprehensive without their input,

questioning, and feedback. Similar to the perceptions and experiences shared from my colleagues, I, too, believe collective participation is an important feature of professional development. The interaction I experienced was essential for my learning and completion of this dissertation.

The fourth core feature, duration, is one that my colleagues identified as certainly important for consideration but not a core feature of professional development. In the case of this dissertation, I assert that duration was an essential feature of the learning experience. A combination of coursework, assignments, and tasks over the past six years provided me with the knowledge and experience necessary to complete the dissertation process. Time spent writing, reflecting, and re-writing has been invaluable to my professional growth. While the process could have progressed more quickly at points, the time I spent was meaningful to my professional learning. Again, similar to the experiences of my colleagues, re-engaging with certain topics or processes throughout the dissertation process has provided me with time to reflect on my understanding. My learning and experience was improved as a result.

Finally, selecting a project aligned to my district needs and goals has highlighted the value of coherence in professional learning. Aligning my personal interests and professional goals resulted in a very fulfilling experience for me. While relevance was an identified need of my colleagues and me in terms of professional development content, I also found relevance to be important in terms of coherence. I plan to share and use the information I have learned through this experience and believe it will influence decision-making in my district. This can, in part, be explained by the commitment to professional development that is present in my school district. Throughout this study, I received the support and cooperation of central office administration as well as the building principals. It was clear that study participants value professional learning

and were eager to provide input and support that would ideally improve the professional learning of each of us individually and all of us collectively. As with the other core features, the fifth core feature of coherence was present in my learning and a contributing factor in its effectiveness. My experience with this particular professional learning endeavor can be described similarly to the experiences of my colleagues. With all five core features present, I experienced valuable, impactful learning.

In terms of the impact of the experience on my learning, I feel as if the process of writing recommendations for the study was very personal to me. I recognized several ideas that I could immediately apply in practice related to professional learning I plan for the district principals. While completing the dissertation process, I was cognizant of simultaneously considering principal input for the dissertation while planning principal professional development sessions. Already, I have experienced a change in my knowledge, attitudes, and practice with my increased awareness from the information shared by district personnel. I anticipate even more profound changes in the coming years as I reflect on the findings and recommendations and institute them in practice.

Thinking about my experience in planning, conducting, and reporting on this study, I have considered that this project could have been an action research project, in many respects, instead of a case study. I felt connected to many of the experiences described by principals and actually attended several of the experiences they described. As a case study researcher, I asked questions and elicited information and details from district participants rather than relying on my own knowledge. The process of interacting with principals and administrators resulted in learning that I may not have otherwise experienced. If another administrator would conduct a

similar study of professional development in his/her own district, the administrator could consider whether a case study or action research study would be appropriate.

## **11.2 PROFESSIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

The information I have learned by conducting this case study will inform my future professional practice as well as provide ideas for further inquiry and educational policy considerations. The interviews and discussions with participants led me to findings and recommendations that will potentially improve the professional learning of the principals and administrators with whom I work every day. I discovered that the process of planning, experiencing, and reflecting on professional development is one that must be intentional and ongoing in order for meaningful professional learning to occur. Individually, the principal participants must fully engage in this process. Collectively, central office administrators must collaborate with and support the principals' professional learning as part of the supervision and evaluation they provide. My goal is to provide this necessary ongoing guidance and support of professional learning for the district principals.

District principals offered several suggestions that will help to improve their experiences with professional development. Principals affirmed the value of professional learning experiences that are based on Desimone's (2009) core features of professional development. As I plan, create, or identify professional development appropriate for the principals, I will consider the core features and their role in each experience. Principals further expressed a desire to have professional learning focused on a set of core values of the district. As a central office administrator, I am involved in the process of creating and monitoring a District Comprehensive

Plan. This plan provides an appropriate framework for a professional learning plan for not only the principals but also for all district professional employees. I plan to use the Comprehensive Plan in future planning of professional development activities to ensure a consistent focus across experiences and years. The Comprehensive Plan outlines strengths and needs based on applicable data and stakeholder input. When coupled with other data sources, it will help me to identify areas in which professional development may be necessary.

In addition to using specific strategies such as these to improve the professional development experiences of the district principals, conducting a case study has resulted in even greater professional gains for me. Following the completion of the study, I have experienced a willingness from the principals to speak openly about their preferences, wants, and needs regarding professional development. I feel as though a partnership has been formed that will have a profound effect on professional learning moving forward. This is perhaps the greatest impact on professional practice that I have experienced thus far.

In addition to the implications for my professional practice, the case study indicated areas for potential further inquiry. The core feature of collective participation is one identified as important by the participants. Principals described the value of collaboration with colleagues and provided examples of their experiences in collaborative configurations including cohorts and professional learning communities. Through their examples, it became evident that studying the similarities and differences of a cohort and a professional learning community may be an important area for future consideration. Knowing the types of structures and activities utilized in each may lead to greater understanding of the core feature of collective participation and may also help to improve professional learning experiences. District principals further identified both the professional development presenter and materials as important components in a professional

development experience. While not identified as core features by Desimone (2009), they were identified as areas for further consideration. I will certainly consider these factors in my role as a central office administrator tasked with planning and providing professional development. Interviewing prospective professional development providers and reviewing materials ahead of time is one way to evaluate the quality of these components. Recognizing the value that principals place on these components, I will make it a priority to plan and recommend professional development that is facilitated by high quality presenters and offers valuable learning materials.

One final area identified as potentially informing future professional development practice is in how professional learning impacts knowledge, attitudes, practice, and student achievement. While this study focused on knowledge, attitudes, and practice holistically, future inquiry could look at each individually or could look at the relationship between professional development and student achievement outcomes. This is an area in which I am interested, and it is also an area that would be appropriate for further research by those interested in the topic.

The final implication for consideration focuses on the impact of Act 45 policy on professional learning experiences. Enacted to improve the professional learning experiences of principals, Act 45 has established criteria for the type and content of principal professional development. Based on the information shared by district participants, it will be important for me as a central office administrator to consider Act 45 requirements when planning and providing professional development. This is something that is unique to each principal and must be considered as such. While some principals may be enrolled in Principal Induction programs or other experiences which satisfy Act 45 requirements, other principals are actively seeking opportunities to meet the requirements. Combining activities that are high quality, aligned to the

core values of the district, inclusive of the core features, and appropriate for Act 45 hours would be my highest priority moving forward. These areas provide a focus for my own professional growth or areas of inquiry for other practitioners that could further inform the topic of principal professional development.

Completing a dissertation on principal professional development has deepened my interest in the topic. While the study helped to provide insight into the principals' perceptions of and experiences with professional learning, it also exposed many other unanswered questions and areas for future exploration. I am grateful for this opportunity and look forward to continuing my search into ways to improve the teaching and learning that occurs every day in our schools.

## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS – BUILDING ADMINISTRATORS

*Prompt: The term professional development, or professional learning, is commonly used in education. Principals in Pennsylvania are required to participate in professional development and additionally often select their own professional learning opportunities. Today we will be talking about both the required and selected experiences in which you have participated. You were asked to review your PERMS (Professional Education Records Management System) Record from PDE which includes the majority of your professional development experiences entered by professional providers. Please feel welcome to utilize the PERMS Record throughout our discussion today.*

*The first few questions will ask you to share your professional learning experiences and to speak about what you believe are important characteristics of professional development and learning.*

1. Can you tell me about some of your most memorable professional development experiences? What about the experience made it memorable?
2. What factors influence your selection of and participation in professional learning?
3. How do you define the word effective if asked about effective professional development you have experienced? What stands out to you about professional development which has been effective?
4. How do you define ineffective if asked about ineffective professional development? What stands out to you about professional development which has not been effective for you?
5. How would you describe an ideal professional learning experience? What features would be present during the experience?

*Prompt: Literature on professional development suggests that there are several core features which are essential in making professional development effective. The next set of questions will*

*ask you to think about some of those features and how you may have experienced them in your own professional development. (Participants can be prompted to refer to the PERMS Record as needed.)*

6. Think about some of the professional development experiences you believe were effective or positive. (Follow up with prompts about ineffective experiences if not specifically mentioned in the response.)
  - a) Tell me about the content (what it is you learned) in effective professional development. What is it about the content that makes the experience effective for you?
  - b) Describe the relationship between the content of effective professional development and your own professional needs or goals? School goals? District goals?
  - c) Describe the learning activities you've experienced which have been effective? What is it about the activities that help to make the learning experience positive?
  - d) Tell me about the interaction you have experienced in positive professional development experiences you've had. How does the structure of participation influence your learning experience?
  - e) Describe the duration of experiences which have been positive (length of sessions, number of sessions, timeframe). How does the duration impact the overall experience?
  - f) Are there any other features of professional development which you believe influence its effectiveness?

*Prompt: The final few questions will ask you how participation in professional development may have impacted your professional knowledge, attitudes, or practice.*

7. Describe what you believe is the ideal outcome of professional learning.
8. Tell me about any professional development experiences which have enabled you to realize this ideal outcome?
9. Are there other professional learning experiences you would like to tell me about which impacted you professionally?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share that I have not asked?

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS – CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATORS

*Prompt: As a central office administrator, you have the opportunity to interact with building administrators – principals and assistant principals – about their perceptions of professional development and experiences. The first few questions will ask you to share your thoughts and experiences about principals’ professional learning and development.*

1. What components do you find are present in effective professional development experiences? Ineffective experiences?
2. Please tell me about similarities and differences between the professional learning you plan and provide for principals and for teachers.
3. During your interactions with principals, what feedback have the principals shared with you about their professional development experiences? Are their needs being met? Are experiences meeting their expectations?
4. What have principals described to you as effective professional learning they have experienced? Ineffective professional learning?

*Prompt: Literature on professional development indicates there are core features present in effective professional development and learning. I am going to ask you for your thoughts about these features when planning and providing professional development for principals.*

5. Think about effective professional development experiences for principals. (Follow up with questions about ineffective experiences if not specifically mentioned in the response.)
  - a) Tell me about the content (what is to be learned) in effective professional development for principals. What is important to you about the topic or type of content?
  - b) Please talk about the relationship between the content of effective professional development and a principal’s professional needs or goals? School goals? District goals?

- c) Describe the learning activities that should be included in effective professional development? What about the activities help to make the learning experience positive?
- d) Tell me about the structure of the interaction or participation in effective professional development. How does the interaction or participation influence the learning experience?
- e) Describe the duration of the experience (length of sessions, number of sessions, timeframe). How does the duration impact the overall experience?
- f) Are there any other features or components of professional development which you believe influence the effectiveness of professional development?

*Prompt: Often, professional development results in changes in knowledge, attitudes, and practice for principals. The final few questions will ask you to consider the potential outcomes of professional development experiences.*

- 6. Which district professional development programs or experiences have resulted in changes in knowledge, attitudes, or practice of principals? What factors have influenced the changes?
- 7. How do you measure the success or failure of professional development programs and experiences which are provided by the school district?
- 8. Talk about some of the other, non-district-provided professional learning experiences of district principals which have resulted in changes in knowledge, attitudes, or practice? What contributed to the impact following these programs or experiences?
- 9. Is there anything else that you would like to share that I have not asked?

## **APPENDIX C**

### **INTRODUCTORY SCRIPT – BUILDING ADMINISTRATORS**

September 2, 2016

Dear School District Building Administrator,

I am currently a doctoral student in the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh and am in the process of completing a dissertation on the topic of Principal Perceptions of Professional Development. My interest in this topic began as I experienced professional development as an elementary school building principal. As I transitioned to the role of a district administrator, my interest continued, as one of my primary responsibilities is to plan and provide professional development to meet the needs of district personnel. The purpose of my research is to gain valuable information about your experiences as a principal with professional learning and development.

As a participant, you are asked to take part in an approximately 45-60-minute interview. During the interview I will ask you to share experiences with and perceptions about professional development. Given the comprehensive nature of the topic of professional development, you are encouraged to reference the Act 48 PERMS (Professional Education Records Management System) record on the Pennsylvania Department of Education website which includes a listing of your recorded professional development experiences. It may also be helpful for you to bring the document with you during the interview.

Attached to this letter is the set of interview questions. You may elect to answer some or all of the interview questions. You may also choose to review any other documents related to the topic

of professional development prior to the interview. Additionally, I request your permission to contact you for clarification of ideas following the interview. The information gathered from these interviews will inform my research on the experiences of district principals and their professional development.

As a voluntary participant, you may withdraw from participation at any time. The information will not be utilized in any way to make a determination of your professional performance and will not impact your professional evaluation. Your responses are confidential and will be used to gather data to inform my dissertation study and potentially the planning of future professional development. There are minimal foreseeable risks associated with your participation which include a potential breach of confidentiality of interview responses. The results will be kept on the University of Pittsburgh server on a password encrypted file. If requested, I will share with you the results of the study following the completion of my dissertation process.

To indicate your intent for participation in the study, please respond by phone or email by September 16, 2016. If you have any questions about the study, please contact me at your earliest convenience.

Thank you,  
Natalie McCracken  
Doctoral Student  
University of Pittsburgh  
[nam81@pitt.edu](mailto:nam81@pitt.edu)  
724.261.6170

## **APPENDIX D**

### **INTRODUCTORY SCRIPT – CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATORS**

September 2, 2016

Dear School District Administrator,

I am currently a doctoral student in the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh and am in the process of completing a dissertation on the topic of Professional Development for Principals. As a fellow school district administrator, I recognize one of the most important responsibilities is to plan professional development for district personnel. The purpose of my research is to gain valuable information about your experiences with and perceptions about the professional development experiences of your district principals and your experiences in planning professional development for district principals.

As a District administrator, you are asked to participate in an approximately 45-60-minute interview in order to share your perceptions and experiences. Attached to this letter is the set of interview questions for the study. You are encouraged to voluntarily review any relevant professional development documents prior to the interview. The information gathered from these interviews and documents will inform me about the professional development program and experiences of district administrators. Additionally, I request your permission to contact you for clarification of ideas following the interview. The information gathered from these interviews will inform my research on the experiences of district principals and their professional development.

As a voluntary participant, you may withdraw from participation at any time. The information will not be utilized in any way to make a determination of any participant's professional performance and will not impact the professional evaluation of any participant. Your responses are confidential and will be used to gather data to inform my dissertation study and potentially the planning of future professional development. There are minimal foreseeable risks associated with your participation which include a potential breach of confidentiality of interview responses. The results will be kept on the University of Pittsburgh server on a password encrypted file. If requested, I will share with you the results of the study following the completion of my dissertation process.

To indicate your intent for participation in the study, please respond by phone or email by September 16, 2016. If you have any questions about the study, please contact me at your earliest convenience.

Thank you,  
Natalie McCracken  
Doctoral Student  
University of Pittsburgh  
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724.261.6170

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