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Collaborating With Teachers To Create Peer Observations As A Means Of Effective Professional Development

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COLLABORATING WITH TEACHERS TO CREATE PEER OBSERVATIONS AS A
MEANS OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and friends who constantly encouraged me to pursue my dreams. Their love and support throughout this process meant the world to me. This dissertation is also dedicated to the memory of my father who inspired, empowered, and believed in me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank and acknowledge the following people who provided support and assistance throughout this dissertation journey. First, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my doctoral committee chair and advisor, Dr. Christopher Bogiages, who was a continuous source of guidance and wisdom. I would also like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Donald Clerico, Dr. Leigh D'Amico, and Dr. Nathaniel Bryan. A special thank you to Dr. Clerico as he has been a constant inspiration to me professionally and personally for eighteen years.

Many thanks to the educators who shared their thoughts and experiences with me and participated in this study. Your willingness and insight made this research possible. Finally, to my family who make all things possible, my husband, Nick, my daughter, Ava, my parents, Tim and Marie Killian, and my in-laws who all offered much encouragement. A special thank you to my father, who is now resting peacefully, for making me promise I would finish this dream and make him proud from above.

ABSTRACT

This phenomenological, action research study engaged a sample of teachers from a large middle school in northern South Carolina in developing a protocol and recommendations for the use of peer observations that would provide meaningful professional development for teachers at this school. Data collection methods consisted of interviews, focus groups and trial observations. The study addressed two key research questions, what factors do the teachers see as important when completing a peer observation, and do they perceive the peer observation method as meaningful professional development that promotes teacher growth. The findings confirmed that, among this sample of teachers, peer observation is seen as an effective form of professional development which can be beneficial to both the observer and the observed teacher. The participants stressed, however, that this is only likely to be the case if peer observation is implemented as a professional development tool and not as a teacher evaluation method, and with adequate time made available for participation in the observations and follow up work. Recommendations and a proposed plan of action for the development and implementation of a peer observation tool at this school are set out. The study also contributes to the wider educational literature by demonstrating the effectiveness of this methodological approach for conducting research into peer observation as teacher professional development in the middle school setting, and by highlighting the relevance of adult learning theory to this area of research.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The professional development of teachers has been shown to be positively associated with teacher performance (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 1999; Wood & Bennett, 2000) and student achievement (Borko and Putnam, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 1999). Peer observations have become a progressively common method of professional development and, when completed effectively, they allow for the self-growth of teachers, which can ultimately promote better student learning and academic achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2010). However, within many academic settings, peer observation has often been used mainly for evaluation and performance management purposes (Peel, 2005) and its potential for facilitating the professional development of teachers is not being realized.

For example, at Eden Middle School (a pseudonym) in northern South Carolina, observations are used purely for the purpose of top-down teacher evaluation. On the rare days that administrators go into a classroom to observe, they open a form on their iPad, check off the boxes on the checklist, make a comment or two at the bottom, and then email the evaluation to the teacher, all within a ten-minute window. The checklist has been used by the current school for teacher evaluation purposes for several years and consists of a checklist of approximately twenty items and a small box for comments. In using the checklist and emailing it to teachers after the observation is completed, few or no conversations with a teacher concerning the observation are typically held, usable

feedback to help the teachers is seldom offered, and teachers hardly ever respond to the evaluation. Administrators observe and send the evaluation to the teachers, the teachers receive and interpret the feedback, and may or may not attempt to alter their instruction. These isolated observations involve no collaboration and opportunities are therefore lost to capitalize on effective professional development through the use of observation.

In Eden Middle School, like many other K-12 schools across the U.S., teachers struggle to cope with the pressures of their day to day workloads, and little time is available for the professional development activities that are ultimately important for improving teacher performance and student outcomes. Peer observation potentially provides opportunities for improved collaboration and sharing of knowledge and best practices among teachers within the school, in ways that can enhance their professional development without a major impact on time or school resources. Indeed, according to adult learning theory, adults generally learn most effectively when engaged in meaningful activities that reflect the types of challenges they face in their everyday work (Lochmiller & Chesnut, 2017). Authentic learning takes place within this context; as John Dewey (1907) stated, the need for teachers to observe each other in context is an ordinary experience that places a "...sense of reality acquired through first-hand contact with actualities" (p. 8). When teachers learn within their classrooms, effective collaboration and enhanced instruction can be expected to take place. The scenario described at Eden Middle School is therefore emblematic of what Fullan refers to as a lack of opportunity for teachers to learn within the setting in which they teach daily (Fullan, 2008).

Given the current lack of enhanced teacher instruction through classroom observations at Eden Middle School, this research presented an opportunity to implement

effective professional development through peer observations and thus to contribute to more effective collaboration and improved teacher instruction within the school.

Background

In the modern American education system, teachers face continuous demands to raise academic achievement among all students. The quality of the teacher is one of the most important factors relating to students' educational outcomes (Steinberg & Sartain, 2015). Teachers are responsible for and held accountable for student learning and academic achievement in the classroom. Student learning and academic achievement are at the forefront of education; therefore, it is imperative that all aspects of education have a positive impact on learning and achievement. Effective professional development to improve skills, attitudes, understandings, and performance is essential in order to enable teachers to provide effective instruction to all students (Fullan, 1990). Valuable professional development offers teachers opportunities to continue their own education by enhancing and developing their range of teaching skills to meet the rapidly changing demands of education. To help advance the professional practice of teachers and increase student achievement, collaborative professional development centered on improving proficiency is crucial (Odden, 1995).

One practical approach that can help support and refine instructional practice is to complete classroom observations (Colvin et al., 2008). While teacher evaluation through observations often has the twofold purpose of both assessing and improving teacher performance, administration observations are mostly completed as an evaluation and not always perceived as an aid to support and refine teacher performance. Conservative evaluations including teacher observations do not have any significant impact on student

learning (Marshall, 1996). While classroom observations provide administrators with a sense of teachers' everyday proficiency and effectiveness, teachers can perceive these observations only as an evaluation and not as professional development intended to improve their practice. A newer approach to observing, peer observations, is being used to facilitate teacher growth and improve teacher quality through professional development and collaboration (Lam, 2001). Meaningful forms of professional development have been shown to enhance standards of classroom instruction (Burk, 2013), and researchers have shown that peer observations as a form of professional development can enhance teacher communication, collaboration, self-confidence, reflection, and result in overall improvements in professional practice (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; Kohut et. al., 2007).

Theoretical Framework

The study uses a theoretical framework based on a combination of Senge's (1990) Theory of the Learning Organization; Lindeman's (1926) Adult Learning Theory, and Bandura's (1971) Social Cognitive/Observational Learning Theory, which together highlight the importance of learning which relates to the learner's real-world experiences and in which they learn from observing others, and the role of their employing organization in providing a supportive environment for this to take place.

Senge's (1990) theory identified the key characteristics of an organization which are important for learning to take place in this setting, including a collaborative culture and a focus on continual learning and development. According to Eduard Lindeman's (1926) Adult Learning Theory, learning should take place in the context of life and learning activities should have a direct application to the adults' everyday lives. Real

world experiences are regarded as particularly important in adult learning within this theoretical perspective. As Lindeman stated, “The resource of highest value in adult education is the learner’s experience. If education is life, then life is also education” (Lindeman, 1926, p. 6). Lindeman’s protégé Malcolm Knowles’ developed the theory of andragogy (1980), which was also grounded in the idea of experience and recognized adult learners as self-directed and autonomous. From this theoretical perspective, the professional development of teachers should coincide with the practice of teaching (Lindeman, 1944; Trotter, 2006). Adults desire to share in the design of their professional development in order to ensure it relates to their teaching practice. Knowles (1980) saw teachers as facilitators rather than presenters and recognized the power of experience in this role. Effective professional development provides teachers with opportunities to enhance and develop their range of teaching skills and improve proficiency within their own classroom.

Albert Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory and related Observational Learning Theory proposed that learning transpires through the observation of peers (Bandura, 1971; Bandura & Huston, 1961). These theories suggest that people are the representatives of transformation in both themselves and their environment through their interaction with that environment (Bandura, 1977). From this perspective, teachers learn by observing their peers and then replicate the observed skills and procedures within their own classrooms. According to Mackeracher (2004), transferable knowledge happens in context where new information is applied to practical situations. Professional development through peer observations is seen as a practical, hands-on approach to

learning that allows teachers to learn new skills and strategies and immediately apply them to their own practice in a direct and highly contextualized manner (Fullan, 2008).

Observational Learning Theory and Adult Learning Theory provide important insights into the ways in which peer observation can be an effective professional development tool, and the Theory of the Learning Organization demonstrates the importance of having the right conditions in place to facilitate this. These theories of learning are also clearly related to the criteria for high quality professional development among teachers as cited in the literature. For example, Archibald, Coggshall, Croft & Goe (2011) synthesized the findings of a range of leading educational researchers and concluded that high quality forms of professional development have five key characteristics: 1) Alignment with school goals, state and district standards and assessments, and other professional learning activities including formative teacher evaluation; 2) Focus on core content and modeling of teaching strategies for the content; 3) Inclusion of opportunities for active learning of new teaching strategies; 4) Provision of opportunities for collaboration among teachers, and 5) Inclusion of embedded follow-up and continuous feedback. Being aligned with school, district and state goals suggests that the professional development will be clearly linked with the day to day reality in which teachers work, and therefore congruent with the way that adults learn best, as explained by Lindeman (1926) and Knowles (1980). The collaborative nature of peer observation, its focus on modelling best practice teaching strategies and its inclusion of feedback mechanisms are in line with Bandura's arguments that adults learn from observing others and applying the learning in practical ways in their own lives and everyday activities. This also indicates that, when practiced well, it will be aligned with

the other listed criteria for high quality professional development: modelling of strategies, active learning, providing collaborative opportunities and including feedback.

The existing literature on the use of peer observation for teacher professional development indicates that it provides opportunities for teachers to become more self-aware, improve their practices, generate knowledge about teaching, and build community through collaboration. As teachers engage in observations amongst colleagues, dialogue, and inquiry about teaching and learning, professional development is taking place as teachers are encouraged to inquire about what effective teaching and learning is and what it looks like and sounds like (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Collaboration with colleagues leads to discussions about instructional design and delivery that encourages teachers to engage in a cycle of constant learning and improvement. When completed effectively, peer observations also allow teachers to develop in ways that ultimately allow for better student learning and improved levels of academic achievement. An iterative process of observation and conferencing focused on improving lesson planning, the classroom environment, and instructional strategies should bring about positive changes in teacher practice. As teachers improve their skills and learn how to best respond to their students' learning needs, student performance is likely to improve (Steinberg and Sartain, 2015).

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to collaborate with teachers to develop a peer observation protocol that would lead to meaningful professional development that promotes teacher growth and collaboration. In fulfilling this purpose, the researcher collaborated with a team of middle school teachers to develop a peer observation

protocol, and also examined their perceptions of the ways in which peer observations are perceived to provide effective professional development opportunities for teachers.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What factors do middle school teachers identify as important when completing peer observations?
2. To what extent is the peer observation method perceived by teachers as meaningful professional development that promotes teacher growth?

Overview of Methods

Action research in the form of Riel's iterative cycle of inquiry was used in this study for the purpose of improving teacher instruction through professional development and collaboration. Action research is a systematic process where the results are real-world, pertinent, and can enlighten theory. The goals of action research include the improvement of practice through continual learning and problem solving; a thorough understanding of practice and development; and an improvement in the community in which one's practice is embedded through participatory research (Riel, 2007). The use of action research methods permitted the research to be conducted in the school setting and allowed teachers to work collaboratively to develop a professional development tool that enhanced their instruction and collaboration.

Riel's progressive problem-solving action research model was used to conduct the study. This model consists of four steps within of a number of subsequent cycles of research, with the steps consisting of planning, taking action, collecting evidence, and reflecting (Riel, 2007). The current research is therefore an iterative cycle of inquiry which has involved reflecting on practice, taking an action, reflecting again, and taking

further action, with improved understanding from each cycle leading the way to improved practice.

In this action research project, qualitative instruments and data were used to study the experiences and perspectives of the teachers in order to address the research questions. Qualitative research typically uses observations, interviews, document analysis, journals, and focus groups (Mertler, 2014). It has been defined “as an emergent, inductive, interpretive and naturalistic approach to the study of people, cases, phenomena, social situations and processes in their natural settings in order to reveal in descriptive terms the meanings that people attach to their experiences of the world,” (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 312). In particular, phenomenology, a qualitative method of research, was used to describe experiences as they were lived by the teachers in this study. Moustakas (1994), the founder of phenomenological research, suggested that research should focus on the entirety of experience and a search for cores of experiences. According to Moustakas, experience and behavior are an integrated and inseparable relationship of a phenomenon with the person experiencing the phenomenon. Qualitative phenomenological studies are used to explain the meaning, structure, and the core of the lived experiences of an individual or group of people around a detailed phenomenon (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2010), in this case the experience of participating in peer observation as a professional development activity and developing an observation protocol.

Phenomenological studies generally use in-depth interviews to gather participants’ detailed description of their experiences. In this action research study, teachers completed observations, in-depth interviews, and participated in a focus group in

order to collect a broad range of data that could be used for triangulation purposes. Triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement and persistent observations are ways to help ensure the accuracy of qualitative data, and to present a complete picture of the solution. The interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and the transcripts were analyzed inductively in a process of open coding in which key themes were identified from the data itself rather than being identified in advance. The data was in this way reduced to a small set of categories or themes relevant to the phenomenon and the research questions being addressed, and which were used to structure the presentation of findings (Mertler, 2014).

The concept of validity in research addresses the question of whether the data that have been collected accurately capture the phenomena that they are intended to capture (Mertler, 2014). In qualitative research, people are the primary source of data collection and analysis. When the subjects' authenticity is accessed through observation and interviews, validity is ensured mainly through the use of a rigorous and transparent qualitative research process (Maxwell, 2005). In this study, participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and that they would remain anonymous in the presentation of findings, and it is assumed that participants provided honest and complete responses within the interviews and focus groups. By describing the research context, detailed methods and assumptions of the study, it is expected that other schools will be able to utilize the same action research process in order to enhance their professional development and collaboration through peer observations in a similar way to the research setting school.

Participants

The participants for this action research project were consenting teachers chosen using a purposeful sampling method. Participants included seven cross-discipline teachers in grades 6-8, drawn from a middle to upper class, suburban large middle school in the southeastern United States. Overall, the sample consisted of one math, two social studies, and four science teachers. Their length of experience of teaching ranges between five and twenty-one years. Four of the teachers held master's degrees. The sample comprised of these seven teachers contained members of the Curriculum and Instruction Focus Team already formed by the principal and the instructional coach at Eden Middle School.

Significance and Limitations

This study contributes to the use of peer observations as a professional development tool that promotes teacher growth and collaboration at the middle school level. Previous research on the use of peer observations for professional development purposes at middle school level is minimal, and this study is therefore expected to make a significant contribution to understanding of how to implement peer observations as a means for the professional development of teachers in similar middle schools, both in northern South Carolina and in other parts of the United States.

The specific findings of this study may have limited generalizability as the sample population was limited to one middle school and a small group of teachers teaching sixth through eighth grades. This is not a weakness, but an inherent feature of the action research nature of this study, which is focused on addressing a particular organizational issue and developing a proposed solution. However, the findings and the research

approach may also be of interest and relevance to other K12 schools interested in developing a similar peer observation initiative for the purpose of professional development.

The study focused on developing a protocol for peer observations, the teachers' perceptions of the observations being used as a professional development tool, and their perceptions of the observations helping to develop collaborative relationships. There was no attempt to link peer observations and feedback to increased student achievement, which is the ultimate educator goal.

Positionality

As an educator for thirteen years, I have taught several different grade levels as well as being an instructional coach and an Assistant Principal. While in the Assistant Principal role for two years, I believe that I failed as an instructional leader because I allowed prevailing, almost inevitable forces to consume my days. Going into the position, I felt excited about meeting and working with the teachers on unit planning, giving suggestions and then observing classes and providing feedback to the teachers to help them to be more successful. However, that was not to be the case. On the rare days that I could go into a classroom to observe, I would open a form on my iPad, check off the boxes of the items I observed on the checklist, make a comment or two in the small box at the bottom, and then email it to the teacher. This was all completed within a ten-minute window. The checklist used has been in use by this school for several years and provides approximately twenty boxes to check if the item is observed and a small box to insert a few comments. In using the checklist and emailing it to teachers after the observation was completed, I did not have a single conversation with a teacher concerning the

observation, much less offer any usable feedback to help the teachers, and teachers never responded to my sent checklist. I felt a failure as an instructional leader, a role which is my passion as an educator. I was never able to offer collegial conversations that eventually led to improvements in teacher instruction and performance.

According to Mertler (2014), real school improvement begins from within the familiar ‘four walls of the classroom’ (p. 12). Because the administration team had focused their observations on evaluation purposes, it became the school’s desire to implement peer observations as a tool for professional development. The desire was to not only implement a protocol for observing peers, but to also encourage collegial, collaborative conversations that would lead to the enhancement of teacher instruction and performance which will increase student learning and academic achievement. As I am no longer employed at this school, my role is now that of a researcher and a facilitator of this action research.

Organization of the Dissertation

This study is organized in five chapters. This first chapter has outlined the purpose of the study and provided an overview of the research. Chapter 2 presents the findings of a review of literature covering previous research relevant to the problem. This included published research relating to professional development, teacher collaboration, and peer observations. The literature provides both a theoretical and empirical perspective for the study and established the framework guiding my research. Chapter 3 presents the methodology used in the study, including the overall research design, participant information, the peer observation process, and the data collection and analysis techniques that were employed. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study by the key

themes and sub-themes arising from the analysis. Chapter 5 discusses these findings and their significance and sets out recommendations and a proposed plan of action for a peer observation initiative in the school.

Definition of Key Terms

Action Research: A research process focused on identifying new methods or approaches with which to improve a certain practice, while generating new knowledge (McNiff and Whitehead 2006).

Adult Learning Theory: Lindeman's (1926) theory and later variations of this, which propose that adults learn most effectively when engaging in learning activities that have direct application to their real-life context.

Teacher collaboration: What occurs when "teachers work together regularly, share their knowledge, contribute ideas, and develop plans for achieving educational goals" (Ketterlin-Geller, Baumer, & Lichon, 2015).

Observational Learning Theory: A theory which contends that people learn from observing the behavior of others and the ways in which this is rewarded or penalized (Bandura, 1977).

Observer teacher: The teacher who observes another teacher's classroom practices or methods during a peer observation.

Observed teacher: The teacher whose classroom practices or methods are observed during a peer observation.

Peer observations: The formative process by which teachers observe each other in order to provide opportunities for teachers to learn about teaching practices and to share evidence-based methods to promote professional growth.

Peer observation protocol: The questionnaire which the observer teacher completes during or after a classroom observation with notes and/or feedback on what they have observed

Phenomenology: A qualitative research method which seems to understand social phenomena from the real-life perspectives of those that have direct experience of them (Whitehead, 2002)

Professional development: Any activity that promotes teacher learning with an emphasis on instructional practices

Professional learning communities: an approach to the professional development of teachers in which they are encouraged to support one another and share practices within a school (Servage, 2008).

Teacher leadership: Practice in which teachers take on roles and responsibilities outside their formal teaching duties, which contribute to improving overall school performance (Palmer, 2018).

Theory of the Learning Organization: Senge's (1990) theory identifying the structures or processes through which organizations facilitate learning and adapt over time to changing conditions (Evans, Thornton & Usinger, 2012).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to collaborate with teachers to develop a peer observation protocol and recommendations for a peer observation initiative that can lead to meaningful professional development that promotes teacher growth and collaboration. The problem of practice is that classroom observations are currently being used in this school only in a limited way by administrators for teacher evaluation purposes, and are not being used in a way that is effective in promoting professional development. The specific research questions used to guide the study were:

1. What factors do middle school teachers identify as important when completing peer observations?
2. To what extent is the peer observation method perceived by teachers as meaningful professional development that promotes teacher growth?

In this chapter, literature relevant to the research problem and the theoretical and methodological approach of the study is examined. First research-based literature is identified that provides a historical context for the topics of peer observations, teacher professional development, collaboration and professional learning communities, and teacher leadership.

Literature used to develop the theoretical framework of the study is then discussed, focusing on three main theoretical models relevant to the research question. The final main section of the literature review discusses literature relating to the

methodological approach for the research. The review of literature thus provides both a theoretical and empirical perspective for the study and establishes the framework used to guide the research.

Peer observations have become a progressively common method of professional development and have been demonstrated to be a powerful tool for improving pedagogical practice (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Peer observations are a training technique grounded in the observational learning theory (Bandura 1971). Peer observations often involve a beginner practitioner observing a veteran in a particular field with the intent of developing or enhancing the skills of the beginner practitioner. In this study, peer observations will refer to a formative process by which teachers observe each other in order to provide opportunities for teachers to learn about teaching practices and to share evidence-based methods to promote professional growth.

Professional development through peer observation gives teachers insights on how to improve their instructional strategies in order to allow students to make gains and achieve their highest potential. When completed effectively, peer observations allow for the self-growth of teachers, which can ultimately promote better student learning and academic achievement. An iterative professional development process of peer observation and conferencing, focused on improving lesson planning, the classroom environment, and instructional strategies, should bring about positive changes in teacher practice. As teachers improve their skills and learn how to best respond to their students' learning needs, student performance is likely to improve (Steinberg and Sartain, 2015). According to Gosling (2005), the objectives of peer observations are: 1) to facilitate reflection on the effectiveness of the participant's own teaching and identify their

development needs; 2) to improve the quality of learning and teaching; 3) to foster discussion and dissemination of good practice, and 4) to increase participant awareness of the student experience of learning (p. 16)

Peer observations have been practiced and documented in the medical field for decades (Hill, 2013; Siddiqui et al., 2007) and more recently in higher education institutions (Palmer, 1998; Pressick-Kilborn & Te Riele, 2008). Within academic settings, peer observation has been used for two main reasons: teacher development and performance management (Peel, 2005). According to Bell (2005), peer observations for the purpose of development in teaching consist of “collaborative, developmental activity in which professionals offer mutual support by observing each other teach; explaining and discussing what was observed; sharing ideas about teaching; gathering student feedback on teaching effectiveness; reflecting on understandings, feelings, actions and feedback and trying out new ideas” (p.3). Activities such as those mentioned by Bell (2005) have been used by teachers in a variety of contexts and grade levels to improve professional practice and to support professional growth as well as student achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

The use of peer observations in the K-12 setting first began to receive some acknowledgement in the literature around the 1970s (Lortie, 1975; Strother, 1989) and has slowly gained attention over time, though the available literature in this area remains limited. Strother (1989) reports on a case in which a Massachusetts superintendent deferred all teacher evaluations for one year in order to focus on peer observations, because summative evaluations were not providing the formative feedback necessary to improve teaching. A decade later, Munson (1998) conducted two comparable peer

observation studies, one in a K-2 setting and one in a high school setting. These used a pre-conference, observation, and a post-conference format designed to establish trust and collaboration between the teachers and enable their professional growth. During the pre-conference, the teachers discussed the lesson objectives, anticipated student behaviors, and determined the data to be collected. The observer scheduled the peer observation, observed for a specific amount of time, and collected the pre-determined data. During the post conferences, the observer conveyed the data and the observed teacher analyzed and reflected with the observer (Munson, 1998). The teachers in this study reported professional growth through this process, but also reported that it had been challenging to find adequate time to meet and observe their peers. Based on the findings, Munson suggested that the inclusion of a coordinator would be beneficial to the process and also recommended continuing the pre- and post-conference discussions.

Early studies (Lortie, 1975; Cosh, 1999) argued that peer observations have a greater impact on educational practice than any other form of professional development. However, Cosh (2002) claimed that it is the observer rather than the observed teacher that is the main beneficiary of the peer observation process, as he found no real indication that people grow and improve through the assessments or comments of others. Evidence from other studies is building, however, to show that both the observing and the observed teacher receive benefits from peer observation. In a higher education setting, for example, Kohut, Burnap & Yon (2007) found that both observers and observees in a peer observation initiative believed that their peer observation instruments were effective measures of teaching effectiveness, and that the peer observation reports were both valid and valuable to them.

Indeed, peer observation has been shown to be associated with a range of benefits for individual teachers, schools and students, according to a review of existing literature conducted by Peel (2005). These include, for example, improvements in teaching practice, improved teacher confidence, the development of a collegial working environment and the adoption of new educational perspectives (Bell, 2005; Quinlan & Akerlind, 2000). Other studies have also documented the benefits of peer observation; Lam (2001) observed for example that peer observations are being used to facilitate teacher growth and improve teacher quality through professional development and collaboration, and Krummel Reinking (2015) noted that they provide teachers with an opportunity to reflect on and expand their practice in ways that increase student achievement.

However, the available research evidence indicates that peer observations are only effective in generating benefits if accompanied by adequate and useful forms of follow-up discussion. Lipton and Wellman (as cited in Roussin and Zimmerman, 2014) emphasize that discussions from observations is the foundation for exploring and improving practice. When observations and collegial conversations are implemented effectively, a school begins to value and engage in data-driven, inquiry-based discussions between colleagues about improving practice. Researchers also note that peer observation involves challenges such as the ability to critically reflect and to provide and accept feedback on both successful and unsuccessful teaching practices (Bell, 2005). For this reason, it is essential that peer observation is implemented in the context of a wider approach to the professional development of teachers which ensures that they are able to

participate effectively in the process. The following sub-section therefore examines relevant literature relating to professional development.

Historical Context

Peer Observations

Peer observations have become a progressively common method of professional development and have been demonstrated to be a powerful tool for improving pedagogical practice (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Peer observations are a training technique grounded in the observational learning theory (Bandura 1971). Peer observations often involve a beginner practitioner observing a veteran in a particular field with the intent of developing or enhancing the skills of the beginner practitioner. In this study, peer observations will refer to a formative process by which teachers observe each other in order to provide opportunities for teachers to learn about teaching practices and to share evidence-based methods to promote professional growth.

Professional development through peer observation gives teachers insights on how to improve their instructional strategies in order to allow students to make gains and achieve their highest potential. When completed effectively, peer observations allow for the self-growth of teachers, which can ultimately promote better student learning and academic achievement. An iterative professional development process of peer observation and conferencing, focused on improving lesson planning, the classroom environment, and instructional strategies, should bring about positive changes in teacher practice. As teachers improve their skills and learn how to best respond to their students' learning needs, student performance is likely to improve (Steinberg and Sartain, 2015). According to Gosling (2005), the objectives of peer observations are: 1) to facilitate

reflection on the effectiveness of the participant's own teaching and identify their development needs; 2) to improve the quality of learning and teaching; 3) to foster discussion and dissemination of good practice, and 4) to increase participant awareness of the student experience of learning (p. 16)

Peer observations have been practiced and documented in the medical field for decades (Hill, 2013; Siddiqui et al., 2007) and more recently in higher education institutions (Palmer, 1998; Pressick-Kilborn & Te Riele, 2008). Within academic settings, peer observation has been used for two main reasons: teacher development and performance management (Peel, 2005). According to Bell (2005), peer observations for the purpose of development in teaching consist of “collaborative, developmental activity in which professionals offer mutual support by observing each other teach; explaining and discussing what was observed; sharing ideas about teaching; gathering student feedback on teaching effectiveness; reflecting on understandings, feelings, actions and feedback and trying out new ideas” (p.3). Activities such as those mentioned by Bell (2005) have been used by teachers in a variety of contexts and grade levels to improve professional practice and to support professional growth as well as student achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

The use of peer observations in the K-12 setting first began to receive some acknowledgement in the literature around the 1970s (Lortie, 1975; Strother, 1989) and has slowly gained attention over time, though the available literature in this area remains limited. Strother (1989) reports on a case in which a Massachusetts superintendent deferred all teacher evaluations for one year in order to focus on peer observations, because summative evaluations were not providing the formative feedback necessary to

improve teaching. A decade later, Munson (1998) conducted two comparable peer observation studies, one in a K-2 setting and one in a high school setting. These used a pre-conference, observation, and a post-conference format designed to establish trust and collaboration between the teachers and enable their professional growth. During the pre-conference, the teachers discussed the lesson objectives, anticipated student behaviors, and determined the data to be collected. The observer scheduled the peer observation, observed for a specific amount of time, and collected the pre-determined data. During the post conferences, the observer conveyed the data and the observed teacher analyzed and reflected with the observer (Munson, 1998). The teachers in this study reported professional growth through this process, but also reported that it had been challenging to find adequate time to meet and observe their peers. Based on the findings, Munson suggested that the inclusion of a coordinator would be beneficial to the process and also recommended continuing the pre- and post-conference discussions.

Early studies (Lortie, 1975; Cosh, 1999) argued that peer observations have a greater impact on educational practice than any other form of professional development. However, Cosh (2002) claimed that it is the observer rather than the observed teacher that is the main beneficiary of the peer observation process, as he found no real indication that people grow and improve through the assessments or comments of others. Evidence from other studies is building, however, to show that both the observing and the observed teacher receive benefits from peer observation. In a higher education setting, for example, Kohut, Burnap & Yon (2007) found that both observers and observees in a peer observation initiative believed that their peer observation instruments were effective

measures of teaching effectiveness, and that the peer observation reports were both valid and valuable to them.

Indeed, peer observation has been shown to be associated with a range of benefits for individual teachers, schools and students, according to a review of existing literature conducted by Peel (2005). These include, for example, improvements in teaching practice, improved teacher confidence, the development of a collegial working environment and the adoption of new educational perspectives (Bell, 2005; Quinlan & Akerlind, 2000). Other studies have also documented the benefits of peer observation; Lam (2001) observed for example that peer observations are being used to facilitate teacher growth and improve teacher quality through professional development and collaboration, and Krummel Reinking (2015) noted that they provide teachers with an opportunity to reflect on and expand their practice in ways that increase student achievement.

However, the available research evidence indicates that peer observations are only effective in generating benefits if accompanied by adequate and useful forms of follow-up discussion. Lipton and Wellman (as cited in Roussin and Zimmerman, 2014) emphasize that discussions from observations is the foundation for exploring and improving practice. When observations and collegial conversations are implemented effectively, a school begins to value and engage in data-driven, inquiry-based discussions between colleagues about improving practice. Researchers also note that peer observation involves challenges such as the ability to critically reflect and to provide and accept feedback on both successful and unsuccessful teaching practices (Bell, 2005). For this reason, it is essential that peer observation is implemented in the context of a wider

approach to the professional development of teachers which ensures that they are able to participate effectively in the process. The following sub-section therefore examines relevant literature relating to professional development.

Professional Development for Teachers

Professional development of teachers has been shown to be positively associated with teacher performance (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 1999; Wood & Bennett, 2000) and student achievement (Borko and Putnam, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 1999). Professional development for teachers has been defined not only as skills training but also of building a suitable culture (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001), in which the school is seen as a community of learners and inquiry (McLaughlin & Zarrow, 2001) and in which the professional development of teachers is a collaborative process. Many schools in the United States are establishing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in which teachers are encouraged to support one another and to share and build on best practices over time. As described by Servage (2008), “the professional learning community brings teachers together on a regular basis to engage in collaborative planning, curriculum study, and learning assessment” (p. 64).

According to DuFour et al. (2008), the overall objective when establishing a Professional Learning Community is not learning new strategies but “creating conditions for perpetual learning” (p. 17). They argue that the most effective way to improve student outcomes is to adopt an approach to professional development in which teachers are continually learning through their everyday job-related activities. Specifically, DuFour et al. (2008) identify the main characteristics of a PLC as follows: 1) a focus on learning rather than teaching; 2) a shared vision and purpose; 3) involving collective inquiry about

best practices in learning and teaching; 4) action-oriented; 5) having a continuous improvement focus; 6) focused on results, and 7) involving the development, implementation and evaluation of specific interventional strategies for improving student response (cited in Beddoes, Prusak, & Hall, 2014).

While professional development for teachers is known to be associated with improved student outcomes and overall school performance, this can only be achieved when the right conditions are in place. In practice, it has been reported in the literature that professional development sometimes becomes a process of credit counting rather than actual learning and can create resentment on the part of teachers particularly if development activities are not perceived to be well-aligned with their learning styles or development needs (Beaver, 2009). Researchers have identified certain conditions to be important facilitators of professional development for teachers, including the provision of opportunities for improving teaching skills; an open, trust-based and collegial culture; administrative support, and allocation of resources (cited in Chow, 2016). Similarly, important conditions for the success of professional learning communities in schools, as identified from previous studies, include shared and supportive leadership; a common purpose and values; a culture of collaboration and problem-solving, and a shared focus on continuous improvement (Carpenter, 2015).

A qualitative study by Thessin (2010) highlighted the importance of having supportive school leaders in order to ensure the effectiveness of the PLC. King (2004) highlights that at individual teacher level, there must be a willingness to participate actively in the learning community, and be willing to share and challenge perspectives, within the context of a supportive and trust-based environment. While allowing for

teachers to share their knowledge and experience, it is also important to ensure that the learning generated from these processes can be converted into practical, relevant concepts for use by the wider community (Riley & Roach, 2006). The following sub-section discusses literature relating to the role of a collaborative culture in supporting professional development in general and peer observation initiatives in particular.

Collaborative Culture

In recognition of the importance of collaborative approaches in improving school performance and student accounts, school reform efforts in recent decades in the U.S. have largely been focused on the transformation of school cultures and on teacher network development (Carpenter, 2015). For example, Gajda and Koliba (2008) noted changes in the traditionally hierarchical structure school management in the US and the replacement of this with collaborative cultures. These developments have largely been a response to national educational policy initiatives: for example, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS, 2004, cited in Gajda & Kaliba, 2008) and the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF, 2003, cited in Gajda & Kaliba, 2008) both highlighted the ways in which standards of teaching and overall school effectiveness depend largely on the existence of collaboration between teachers. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT, 2004, cited in Gajda & Kaliba, 2008) also emphasized that collaborative inquiry by teachers with the purpose of improving practice is essential for achieving desired academic outcomes, and the National Middle School Association (2008, cited in Gajda & Kaliba, 2008) has argued for the importance of collaborative leadership and teacher collaboration. As Aguilar (2016) observed “our big

dreams for transforming schools depend on highly functioning groups of educators working together”.

In broad terms, collaboration has been defined as persons coming together to share the responsibility and authority for decision making (Hord, 1986). Individuals alone are not able to transform schools into places where all children learn daily; groups of teachers bring together more skill, knowledge, and experience than any single individual is able to provide to schools (Aguilar, 2016). Leonard and Leonard (2003) describe professional collaboration in the school setting as what occurs when “teachers work together regularly, share their knowledge, contribute ideas, and develop plans for achieving educational goals” (p. 3). Collaboration within a school can occur between teachers, within a grade level, content area, or across support services, and can help build the trust and collegial relationships that are known to be essential for improving school and student performance (Ketterlin-Geller, Baumer, & Lichon, 2015).

A range of literature indicates that teacher collaboration is one of the most important factors contributing to improved school and student-level performance. Strong connections have been made between collaborative cultures, student achievement, and the structure and content of relationships amongst teachers (Reilly, 2017). Researchers have provided evidence that collaboration is associated with benefits for teachers (Ketterlin-Geller et al, 2015; Mangin, 2016); the school environment (Hausman & Goldring, 2001; Kelchtermans, 2006; Shachar & Shmuelewitz, 1997) and student achievement (Goddard et al., 2007; Louis and Marks, 1998; Moolenaar et al., 2012; Vescio et al., 2008).

Teacher collaboration leads to enhanced awareness of instructional practices, and thus improves instructional practice, leading to greater student learning. Collaboration among school professionals plays an important role in helping their professional growth and improving the quality of instruction in a school (Bryk and Schneider, 2003). For individual teachers, collaboration allows for more effective planning time, collective resources, and sharing of effective practices which can increase productivity (Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2015). Teachers who work collaboratively to develop common standards, share their practice, participate in reflective dialog, and focus on student learning are more likely to experience sustained learning (Mangin, 2016). Effective teacher collaboration supports student learning and is being shown to have positive impacts on student achievement (Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2015).

Administrators are responsible for creating a school culture that values and cultivates collaboration among teachers. Effective school leadership is essential to support a collaborative culture and ensure that the right conditions are in place to promote and sustain this (e.g. Hallinger, 2003; Bryk and Schneider, 2003). This involves, for example, the provision of time and processes for activities such as developing and articulating a shared vision and goals, effective planning and coaching or mentoring (Coburn and Russell, 2008; Moolenaar et al., 2012). Increasingly, the adoption of peer observation initiatives is becoming an important aspect of a collaborative culture, along with other practices such as peer coaching, reviewing grading practices, and formative assessments of teacher practice (Min, Modeste, Salisbury & Goff, 2016). The research evidence shows that collaborative approaches are most successful when teachers feel comfortable and confident in sharing their views and experiences and are prepared to take

the risks necessary for effective change (Harris & Jones, 2010; Vescio et al., 2008). One of the main roles of school leadership, therefore, is to promote a trust-based culture which is supportive of collaboration (Hallam et al., 2015). However, this is not down to the school principal alone: shared leadership is another important feature of a collaborative school culture. Peer observation along with other collaborative practices also provides opportunities for outstanding teacher leaders to emerge who can have a significant impact on overall school performance. The following sub-section therefore discusses literature relating to teacher leadership.

Teacher Leadership

Since the 1980s the concept of teacher leadership has been progressively used as an approach for instructional improvement in schools. In broad terms, the term refers to teachers taking on roles and responsibilities outside their formal teaching duties, which contribute to improving overall school performance (Palmer, 2018). Teacher leadership has also been discussed as a means by which teachers impact school-wide instruction or policy (Stein, Macaluso, & Stanulis, 2016). The growing emphasis on teacher leadership reflects official policy initiatives supporting this approach: in 2014, for example, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and the National Education Association collaborated in the development of specific teacher leader competencies within the categories of instructional leadership, policy leadership, and association leadership (Palmer, 2018). This was also intended to attract talented educators to America's public school system: "If we expect ambitious, intellectually engaged people to become teachers and remain in our public schools, we must offer them a career path

that is exciting and varied over the long term, and which includes opportunities to lead among adults, not just children” (Goldstein, 2014, p. 269).

Teacher leadership thus generates new roles and responsibilities that are important for enriching the profession and advancing educational improvement (Bae, Hayes, O’Connor, Seitz, Distefano, 2016). These leadership opportunities officially recognize the talents of outstanding teachers who contribute to student learning, collaboration amongst colleagues, and overall school improvement. Through developing the knowledge and skills needed to inform and lead school improvement efforts, teachers are becoming instructional coaches, participating in decision-making, and leading new types of training initiatives.

Using teacher leaders as a source of learning support to aid in school improvement through professional learning improves teacher instruction and increases student achievement (Mangin, 2016). Many schools are now therefore implementing or supporting formal and informal teacher leadership initiatives in order to build shared capacity and offer support for improvement efforts. The intended ultimate outcome of teacher leadership is improved teaching and learning (Mangin, 2016; Stein, et al., 2016). However, teacher leaders must have the right attributes to be able to contribute effectively to these outcomes: in particular, those who have high levels of teaching efficacy, or the belief that he or she has the capacity to affect student performance, are likely to generate more change and contribute to enhanced instructional and student outcomes (Stein, Macaluso, & Stanulis, 2016). Other attributes found to be important in teacher leaders include a commitment to continuous improvement, an openness to

experiment with new instructional approaches and a willingness to share experiences with other teachers (Palmer, 2018).

The advancement of teacher leadership reflects a growing body of research evidence of the importance of teacher learning for constant instructional improvement and the ways in which teacher leadership can enable professional learning. Research demonstrates that instructional improvement is dependent upon teachers' continuing access to quality learning opportunities (Mangin, 2016). Teacher leaders provide support to colleagues such as planning, lesson modelling, observing teaching and giving feedback, collecting and analyzing data, facilitating discourse, collaborating, and promoting common practices among teachers. They engage in varied leadership roles with the goal of improving instruction and shaping school culture. For teachers to be valued as leaders, they must be respected, learning-oriented, and have leadership abilities. Leadership work within the schools must be valued, evident, negotiated and shared. Structural conditions must include a supportive culture, supportive administration and colleagues, sufficient time and resources for teacher leadership, and professional development opportunities for teacher leaders (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Peer observation provides an ideal opportunity for the emergence of teacher leaders, as discussed by Palmer (2018). Observed teachers are able to receive constructive feedback which facilitates their self-growth, while observers are exposed to a wider range of instructional practices and must develop the reflective and critical feedback abilities essential for effective teacher leadership.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the study builds on three theoretical models, as well as the empirical literature discussed in the previous section. Specifically, the three models used in the theoretical framework are: 1) Theory of the Learning Organization (Senge, 1990); 2) Adult Learning Theory (Lindemann, 1926; Knowles, 1989), and 3) Social/Observational Learning Theory. All three theoretical models are relevant to the issue of peer observation by teachers and are useful in guiding the design and implementation of the research and the analysis and interpretation of the research data.

Theory of the Learning Organization

Senge's (1990) theoretical framework for learning organizations was intended to identify the structures or processes through which organizations facilitate learning and adapt over time to changing conditions (Evans, Thornton & Usinger, 2012). Senge (1990) defined the learning organization as a place "where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3). Other researchers have defined a learning organization as one which "learns continuously and transforms itself" (Watkins & Marsick, 1993, p.8) and one in which learning processes are "analyzed, monitored, developed, managed, and aligned with improvement and innovation goals" (Gephart, Marsick, Van Buren, & Spiro, 1996, p. 36). These are all apt descriptions of a school environment with a collaborative culture and professional learning community approach, in which practices such as peer observation may be adopted as key tools for continuous learning and improvement.

More specifically, Senge's (1990) model identified five inter-related dimensions of a learning organization, all of which must be in place for true learning and performance improvement to take place. These were defined as:

Personal mastery: which represents the process by which individuals address the gap between their current level of skills and expertise and those which they aspire to attain. For personal mastery to be possible, individuals must hold a clear future vision for themselves, which is aligned with the shared organizational vision and provides a roadmap for development and growth. A learning organization will encourage the development of vision and strategies for personal mastery. In a school setting, personal mastery can be facilitated through teacher evaluation processes as well as collaborative inquiry methods (Evans et al., 2012).

Mental models: A learning organization provides its members with opportunities for collaboration and discussion, whereby different mental models can be identified and explored. In the school setting, for example, these models may consist of different pedagogical approaches, which are discussed openly in order to identify effective practice for possible classroom use. By encouraging open discussion, school leaders can help ensure that any mental models which are held by teachers but are not conducive to the achievement of the shared organizational vision can be identified and addressed, while those that are best aligned to the vision can be shared and reinforced (Evans et al., 2012).

Shared vision: Senge (2006) defined this as the "collective caring" in the organization, or the shared understanding of what the school intends to achieve in terms of student and school-level outcomes. By creating the conditions whereby this vision is collectively developed and articulated, school leaders can maximize levels of teacher

commitment to the vision and promote collaborative discussion of strategies for achieving it (Evans et al., 2012).

Team learning: Senge (1990) emphasized that most organizational learning takes place at team level rather than individual level and consists of deep inquiry to identify the most effective ways of achieving organizational goals. In his later work, Senge (2006) defined three specific conditions that promote this: the ability to think deeply about complex issues; effective co-ordination between team members and integration between teams across the organization. Within schools, team learning can be promoted through the use of collaborative inquiry projects and regular staff meetings to discuss key issues (Evans et al., 2012) as well as specific collaborative initiatives such as peer observation.

Systems thinking: When members of an organization adopt systems thinking, they are conscious of the impact of their actions and decisions on all other members and parts of the organization. Interdisciplinary or cross-grade initiatives within schools are examples of the ways in which systems thinking can be implemented for maximum impacts on school performance (Evans et al., 2012). Peer observation initiatives involving teachers from different grade levels or subject areas acknowledge that learning is often transferable across these areas and make best use of the knowledge and expertise of teachers for the overall benefit of the school and its students.

From the 1990s onwards, the learning organization model was extensively adopted into educational research and has been utilized both as a recommended approach to school reform (e.g. Duffy, 1997; Weller & Weller, 1997) and as a professional development tool for teachers (e.g. Dilworth & Imig, 1995; Redding & Kamm, 1999). Over time, various studies have used the model to identify the conditions important for

organizational learning in both elementary and secondary schools. For example, Leithwood, Leonard, and Sharrat (1998) found that these include a collaborative and collegial school culture; structures to facilitate teacher participation in decision-making, and policies and resources for the purpose of supporting the professional development of teachers. Evans et al. (2012) also used Senge's (1990) framework to identify the ways in which schools can become learning organizations, as highlighted in relation to the dimensions of the model listed above.

Adult Learning Theory

It is essential that professional development initiatives for teachers build on what is known about how adults typically learn. Lindeman's (1926) adult learning theory and the later iteration by Knowles (1989), which has been widely adopted in the teacher professional development literature, therefore comprise the second component of the theoretical framework for this study.

Adult learning theories are based on the understanding that adults generally learn most effectively when engaged in meaningful activities that reflect the types of challenges they face in their everyday work (Lochmiller & Chesnut, 2017). The father of adult learning theory, Eduard Lindeman, emphasized that learning should be coterminous with life and adult learners must participate in learning activities that have direct application to the adults' real-life context (Lindeman, 1926). Lindeman believed that "experience is the adult learner's living textbook" (1926, p. 7). Adult learning should promote critical reflection and prompt an awareness of the culturally constructed nature of the environment. This means that professional development activities for teachers should be designed to be relevant to their everyday work situations, build on previous

learning and help them progress towards achieving their personal career aspirations. The teachers themselves should also be directly involved in the development of these initiatives (Scott & Webber, 2008).

Many professional educators who participate in PLCs have adopted the adult learning theory first developed by Malcolm Knowles in the 1960s. Knowles (1989) felt there was a need to study the ways in which adults learn and created a new name for adult learning theory: andragogy (p. 79). Knowles developed the andragogical model of learning using four original principles, later adding two additional principles. These are summarized by Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) as follows: 1) As a person matures, his or her self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality toward one of a self-directed human being; 2) An adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experience, which is a rich resource for learning; 3) The readiness of an adult to learn is closely related to the developmental tasks of his or her social role; 4) There is a change in time perspective as people mature—from future application of knowledge to immediacy of application. Thus, an adult is more problem centered than subject centered in learning; 5) The most potent motivations are internal rather than external; Adults need to know why they need to learn something (Knowles, 1980; Knowles, 1984; Knowles & Associates, 1984).

According to Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998), adults desire to learn based on their personal goals which allow for knowledge gains. Learning outcomes are greater when adults learn what they need to know based on their needs. Knowles therefore challenged the idea that adults are inert receivers of knowledge and are driven by external forces.

More recent, researchers have expanded the idea of andragogy. MacKeracher (2004), linking her research to Knowles et. al. (1998), describes adult learners based on adult learning, “as autonomous individuals capable of identifying their own learning needs and planning...” (p. 23). According to MacKeracher (2004, p. 25), adults can and do learn throughout their entire lives. Adults are not mature children, nor are children immature adults; therefore, detailed features of the adult learner such as the past, biological, and life influences are equated and acknowledged. MacKeracher reports that the physical, mental and emotional changes that adults undergo over time all contribute to their abilities to learn and retain information. Life experiences generate new information which allows learning to be continuous. The role of time in the life of an adult has important implications for the learning process. Both self-directedness and relatedness to others contribute to how adults prefer to learn. For adults, transferable knowledge occurs in context where innovative information is applied to everyday situations (MacKeracher, 2004).

Peer observation as a professional development tool is aligned with the adult learning theory and the andragogical model which proposes that the everyday experiences of educators should be the basis of their professional development. Teachers have a wide range of different experiences and understanding which need to be taken into account when planning PLC meetings and approaches (Knowles, 1989). MacKeracher’s (2004) arguments provide further support for the idea that peer observations allow teachers to engage in professional development based on their needs, experiences, desires, and their own path. Teachers learn from each other, generate relative learning, and create collaborative environments which are essential for continuous organizational

improvement (Fullan, 2008). This is in line with the argument of Trotter (2006) that professional development should coincide with the practice of teaching and provide a practical, hands-on approach to learning that is relevant to teaching practice. Oji (cited in Trotter, 2006) conducted qualitative research into the relevance of adult learning theory to the professional development of teachers and found that the teachers in her sample were keen to problem solve with their peers and learn about things that they could apply in practical terms in their own classrooms. Beaver (2009) observes that by providing an environment that is conducive to these forms of adult learning, school leaders also help build a culture of trust and appreciation which contributes to ongoing peer learning even after a specific professional development initiative has been concluded. King (2004) emphasizes the importance of this supportive environment for adult learning, noting that it can be difficult for teachers to question their pre-existing views and beliefs, and needing the support of others as they do so.

Social/Observational Learning Theory

The third main component of the theoretical framework for this study is social learning theory or observational learning theory, terms which are often used interchangeably in the literature. This has its foundations in the work of Bandura (1977) who argued that people learn from observing the behavior of others and the ways in which this is rewarded or penalized.

In contrast with earlier theories of learning which had focused on behavioral change in response to direct external stimuli, Bandura's social learning theory highlighted the reciprocal nature of learning and showed that individuals both influence and are influenced by others in their environment. Learning occurs when people observe what

others do, take account of the consequences of their behaviors; relate these mentally to their own lives, experiment with the behaviors themselves and observe the consequences and if these are positive, change their own behaviors accordingly (Bandura, 1977). This is the very approach taken in peer observation, where teachers observe one another's classroom practices, relate these to their own experiences and experiment with them in their own classrooms, finally adopting those which prove to generate positive outcomes.

Many researchers have used social learning theory to investigate how learning takes place as a result of the social interactions that occur within organizations and the ways in which learning communities develop (e.g. Cole & Wertsch, 1996; Stein & Coburn, 2008). Within this body of research, studies have identified the organizational conditions necessary for social learning to take place, which largely correspond with those identified earlier in the context of professional learning communities. For example, Garvin, Edmondson, and Gino (2008) determined that the three main “building blocks” (p.2) which form the necessary foundation for organizational learning are: 1) a “supportive learning environment”, in which individuals feel secure in exploring new ideas and different perspectives and have time to do so; 2) “concrete learning processes and practices”, such as information transfer processes or experimental initiatives, and 3) “leadership that reinforces learning”, including leaders that encourage sharing and discussion of different perspectives (Garvin et al., 2008, pp. 3-4).

Education researchers have stressed in particular the role of psychological safety for encouraging social learning. Bryk and Schneider (2003) and Ronfeldt and Reininger (2012), for example, emphasize that teachers must feel comfortable in sharing their experiences and asking questions of others in an open and honest way, and that high

levels of trust must be present in the organization to ensure that this is achieved. Ronfeldt and Reininger (2012) stress that observations along with actual classroom experience are essential in order to build on the formal training of teachers and provide them with the skills necessary to generate positive student learning outcomes. O'Rourke (2006) identified several individual-level learner conditions that must be in place for observation-based learning to take place: 1) attention – the observer must pay attention to the behavior being observed; 2) retention – the observer must be able to remember the behavior; 3) reproduction – the observer must be able to replicate the behavior, and 4) motivation - the observer must want to be able to replicate the behavior. These identified conditions all have implications for the effectiveness of peer observation in schools and must be taken into account when planning such initiatives.

Having described the theories used to develop the overall framework for the study, the following section discusses literature relating to the overall methodological approach and the specific data collection and analysis methods used.

Methodological Literature

Research Paradigm

The choice of research methods for a study should always reflect the nature of the information needed to answer the research questions (Newell & Burnard, 2011), but are also influenced by the selected epistemological paradigm, or philosophy of knowledge. The two main epistemological paradigms are positivism and interpretivism/constructivism, which correspond broadly with quantitative and qualitative research methods. The positivist approach assumes that social phenomena are subject to cause and effect relationships like the physical world, and that quantitative or statistical methods

can be used to identify and measure these (Newell & Burnard, 2011). In contrast, the interpretivist/constructivist approach assumes that reality is socially constructed by the individuals involved and that social phenomena can only be truly understood by exploring individual perspectives in depth using qualitative or unstructured methods (Tuli, 2010; Newell & Burnard, 2011). The interpretivist/constructivist approach using qualitative methods is used for the present study, since the objective is to understand experiences of peer observation from the perspectives of teachers involved in the process.

Qualitative Methods

Within the qualitative research tradition, there are three distinct approaches: phenomenology, grounded theory and ethnography. Ethnography is concerned with examining cultural or sub-cultural settings in a holistic way using a range of methods; grounded theory is focused on the development of new theories about social processes by studying the experiences of individuals, and phenomenology – the approach used within this study – uses in-depth interviews or focus groups with research participants in order to understand a social phenomenon from the real-life perspectives of those that have direct experience of it (Whitehead 2002; Starks and Trinidad 2007). Phenomenology enables a researcher to understand how it feels to have this experience from the perspective of the participants and their views on how it might be improved, taking into account the wider real-life context in which they exist. In the case of this study, the intention was to explore the teachers' direct experiences of peer observation in order to develop a recommended protocol and processes that reflect best practices as perceived by those directly involved in the initiative.

There are two main phenomenological schools of thought relating to the ability of the researcher to remain objective when collecting, analyzing and interpreting the research data, given that he or she also often has existing experiences and perceptions of the phenomenon being investigated. This is particularly relevant to action research in which the researcher is often also a practitioner within the research setting. The approach associated with Husserl (1859-1938) assumes that a researcher's personal knowledge of the phenomena can be put aside in a process of "bracketing" or "suspending judgment". In contrast, the interpretative approach associated with Heidegger (1962) contends that the researcher's own perceptions and experiences cannot be separated from the research process and that there is value in drawing on them when interpreting the data, as long as the ways in which this is done are fully documented as part of the analysis procedures (Richards and Morse 2007; Balls 2009).

Within action research, the main investigator often draws on their own knowledge and experience when engaging with the research participants, and it is important to keep a research diary setting out the ways in which this was done (Barbour, 2007). This is important to ensure that a study meets the criteria defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as important standards for qualitative research. In brief, these criteria are defined as follows: *credibility*, or confidence that the findings appear to be credible or "true"; *dependability*, or that the same findings would be generated if the study was repeated; *transferability*, or that the findings could be applied to other settings, and *confirmability*, or that the findings have been objectively generated and not influenced by the researcher's pre-existing beliefs or biased views (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Action Research

Within the constructivist/interpretivist paradigm and the qualitative approach, action research methods were selected for the study as these are well aligned with the theoretical framework as well as the objectives of the research. Action research methods are widely used in educational research and focus on the use of research to generate practical solutions that drive positive organizational change. McNiff and Whitehead (2006) describe action research in terms of a process for identifying new methods or approaches with which to improve a certain practice, while generating new knowledge. Although there are no formal or accepted definitions of action research (Carboni, Wynn, & McGuire, 2007), one of the defining features is that this type of research is frequently conducted by practitioners themselves, such as teachers, and not by external researchers. It is generally a collaborative research activity which involves “questioning, examination and deconstruction of existing knowledge” (Mahani & Molki, 2012, p. 210).

As applied in the educational context, action research has been described as “a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own social or educational practices; (b) their understanding of these practices; and, (c) the situations in which these practices are carried out” (Carr and Kemmis, 1983, p. 152). Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) observed that action research is conducted not simply to solve an organizational problem but to pose and explore questions about practices and how they can be improved. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) there are three main interrelated conceptual frameworks within which action research can be conducted: 1) social inquiry, for the purpose of exploring critical questions and transforming

educational practice; 2) generating knowledge within communities, by building on practice-based knowledge and skills to build theory, and 3) practical inquiry, in order to develop practical knowledge and improve practice in a particular context. The conceptual framework adopted will often determine the research methods used and the level of inquiry, which can range from individual teacher to school-wide initiatives.

The concept of action research was first introduced by Lewin (1946) as a cyclical process involving several steps, repeated iteratively over time. These steps were defined as 1) observing that improvements are needed in a certain practice; 2) planning a course of action to carry out changes in this practice; 3) carrying out the plan, and 4) evaluating the effects of the plan and making changes to future practice based on the results. Others have similarly conceptualized action research in terms of consecutive cycles of “planning, acting and reflecting”, conducted in relation to an identified problem of practice in order to develop a strategic plan to address this.

Dean (2006) notes that the process of alternating between action and reflection helps provide valuable insight and understanding of the problem and what actions can be taken to improve it. Wang, Kretschmer & Hartman (2010) argue that reflection is essential in order to prepare practitioners, such as teachers, to address challenges that their formal training may not have prepared them for, and to ensure that they become active learners and take responsibility for their own professional development. Indeed, action research has been increasingly adopted as a new form of professional development for teachers. In contrast with the traditional forms of development in which teachers passively consume information through reading or attending workshops for example, action research allows teachers to engage actively in trying out particular activities or

ideas in the classroom in order to increase their own knowledge of what works in practice, as well as contributing to improved school and student outcomes (Bednarz, 2002). Researchers have also documented evidence of other personal and professional benefits of action research for teachers, such as gaining new skills and knowledge, becoming more discerning, critical users of educational ideas, and becoming more effective agents of change within their schools (Bednarz, 2002). Mertler (2013) points out that the main benefit of action research is that it enables teachers to identify and implement strategies that actually work with their own students in their own classrooms, while at the same time providing an ideal form of professional development which is tailored to the specific needs of teachers in this setting.

Classroom-based action research — with its cyclical nature of systematic investigation of teaching and learning, followed by data-driven improvements resulting from the outcomes of the investigations — provides not only a viable, but also valuable, professional development alternative. Following the development of improvement goals, the process of action research can be used to customize a teacher's professional development, allowing for a much more meaningful approach to professional growth. This approach permits teachers to investigate *their* own practice and to discover what will and will not work for *their* students in *their* classrooms. (p.38)

Action research has been so widely adopted within educational research that a specific category of “teacher action research” is often referred to in the literature. Souto-Manning (2012) argues that this field, in which teachers research their own practices, is highly important in helping to raise awareness of the “critical and transformative aspects

of teaching and learning” (p.54). An example from the literature of “teacher action research” that was broadly similar to the current research is a study by Bednarz (2002). In this project, three sub-groups of teachers were involved in an initiative designed to develop and implement the National Geography Standards, one of which used action research. This sub-group held interviews with workshop instructors about how to collect data and frame research questions in order to test the proposed new curriculum units, and also sought the views of students. Bednarz reported that while all the participants gained skills, knowledge and confidence, this was particularly the case for those in the action research group, who also learned that it was valuable to listen to student views. The researchers concluded that “the process of reflection (field testing) and research enhanced the ability of the teachers to learn new strategies in performance assessment to implement the Geography Standards. It appeared that they enjoyed the interaction with students and fellow teachers, and the process of becoming "expert" (Bednarz, 2002).

Other researchers have noted that the advantages of using action research in the educational context include the focus on solving practical problems and improving practice, and the approach has also been praised for its participatory focus and for the ways in which action researchers improve their own knowledge and skills through the action research process (Mahani & Molki, 2012). The reported disadvantages or potential weaknesses of this method include ethical issues arising from conflicts of interest between the various participants in the study; the difficulties of maintaining sufficient neutrality or objectivity as a practitioner-researcher, and finding sufficient time for teachers to participate in the research (Mahani & Molki, 2012; Nolen & Putten, 2007).

Data Collection Methods

In the case of the present study, the cyclical stages of action research for the purpose of developing a peer observation protocol and process were met through a series of individual interviews and group discussions with a sample of teachers in the school which comprised the research setting. An iterative process of developing the protocol and recommended processes was used, in which participants provided their input to drafts and recommended guidance. These were then tested by the participants in a series of actual peer observations in one another's classrooms, and subsequently refined and finalized based on their feedback.

Although action research often incorporates a range of mixed qualitative and quantitative methods, qualitative data collection is particularly valuable since action research typically builds on and synthesizes existing organizational knowledge, which is held by individual teachers. Unlike quantitative research in which data is collected about variables that can be coded numerically, qualitative research in the phenomenological tradition typically uses unstructured or semi-structured data collection in which participants are invited to explain their views and experiences in their own words (Creswell, 2003).

The research used both individual and group discussions to generate a wide range of relevant data for the purpose of understanding the participants' experiences of and views on peer observation. One of the benefits of including individual interviews in a research study is that these allow the interviewer to retain more control over the discussion and to collect more data about the views and experiences of individuals (Morgan 1997). In the phenomenological, qualitative research tradition, these can be

unstructured or semi-structured and the researcher can vary the order or wording of questions in order to tailor these to the individual research participants' experiences (Phellas et al., 2012). An advantage of using focus groups or discussion groups, however, is that the interaction between participants often generates additional useful insights which might not have emerged from one to one interviews (Duggleby, 2005; Morgan 1997; Wood 2006). As Rubin and Rubin (1995) explain, "in focus groups, the goal is to let [participants] spark off one another, suggesting dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one individual might not have thought of. Sometimes a totally different understanding of a problem emerges from the group discussion" (p. 140). This is a particularly useful and efficient method of data collection when the purpose is to collectively develop a document or a process as in the case of the current project.

Data Analysis Methods

A process of thematic analysis was used to analyze and interpret the data from the pre- and post-interviews and discussion groups. Maguire & Delahunt (2017) observe that thematic analysis is particularly well suited to research on learning and teaching as it is flexible method that is not tied to any particular epistemological or theoretical perspective. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a method for "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data" (p.79). Themes are intended to capture key ideas from the data which relate to the research questions or purpose of the study and reflect patterns or meanings from the data itself (Braun & Clarke 2006). Within phenomenological research, these are primarily identified in a bottom-up, inductive way from the data analysis, though an interactive process is often used in which top-down themes are also identified from the theoretical framework of the

study. Thematic analysis generally consists of a three-stage process in which qualitative data is prepared for analysis by transcribing, is reduced into themes through a process of coding, and is represented in the presentation of results by the key themes and sub-themes which emerged from the coding process (Creswell, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed literature relating to the historical context of the issue of peer observation and related professional development issues for teachers, set out the theoretical framework for the study, and used existing literature to explain the methodological approach.

This review of relevant literature review has provided a theoretical and empirical foundation for the present study, which consists of action research designed to develop a best practice protocol and recommended processes for the use of peer observation within the school selected for the study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to collaborate with teachers to develop a peer observation protocol that would lead to meaningful professional development that promotes teacher growth and collaboration (Munson, 1998; Lam, 2001). The focus of peer observations is on taking ownership of professional growth, not evaluation (Munson, 1998). This action research presented an opportunity to implement effective professional development through peer observations in order to improve teacher instruction. In fulfilling this purpose, the researcher collaborated with a team of middle school teachers to develop a peer observation protocol and examined their perceptions of the observations promoting professional development and collaboration. The research questions were identified to understand the important factors to consider when completing a peer observation to provide effective professional development to enable teachers to improve their instruction and collaboration.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What factors do middle school teachers identify as important when completing peer observations?
2. To what extent is the peer observation method perceived by teachers as meaningful professional development that promotes teacher growth?

This action research project used Riel's progressive problem-solving action research model consisting of planning, taking action, collecting evidence, and reflecting.

Qualitative data were collected August through January using interviews and a focus group and analyzed using open coding according to categories and themes. Participants included seven teachers in one middle school in the southeastern part of the United States.

Methodology Rationale

Attempting to study the use of peer observations as a professional development experience for teachers is a problem of practice that can be thoroughly studied by a qualitative, action research study. Qualitative research allows for discovering and understanding the meaning individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem and how the events, actions, and meanings are formed by the exclusive situations in which these occur (Creswell, 2003; Maxwell, 2005). Qualitative research is also a flexible approach to data collection which allows for changes in the research design to reflect emerging findings (Maxwell, 2005). This qualitative research focused on the experiences of seven teachers in implementing a peer observation tool to enhance professional development. A qualitative approach was deemed to be suitable for the study as data could be collected to inform content and format of the peer observation tool using interviews and focus group meetings, and changes were made throughout the research to this to make it a more effective professional development tool.

Qualitative research also provides results and interpretations that are expected to be logical and experientially reliable when judged from the perspective of the research participants and others (Maxwell, 2005). Other characteristics of qualitative research are that it takes place in a natural setting, enables researchers to collect data themselves, can potentially use multiple sources of data, can employ either inductive or deductive data

analysis or both, places values on the meanings that participants place on the phenomenon, follows an emergent design, and creates a complete picture of the issue (Creswell, 2003). Because the peer observation protocol was developed by teachers for teachers, the credibility and reliability of the tool can be expected to be higher and more readily accepted by other teachers in this school.

Action Research methods are widely used in educational research and focus on the use of research to generate practical solutions that drive positive organizational change. Action Research often focuses on resolving an explicit classroom or school issue, refining practice, or aiding in decision making, with a main goal being to improve practice fairly instantly within one or two classrooms or schools (McMillan, 2004). As discussed in chapter 2, one of the most important benefits of action research is that it enables teachers to identify and implement strategies that actually work with their own students in their own classrooms, while at the same time providing an ideal form of professional development which is tailored to the specific needs of teachers in this setting (Mertler, 2013). One of the defining features is that this type of research is frequently conducted by teacher practitioners themselves, and not by external researchers. It is generally a collaborative and self-reflective research activity, in teachers are actively engaged actively in trying out particular activities or ideas in the classroom in order to increase their own knowledge of what works in practice (Bednarz, 2002).

The key tenets of Action Research as identified by Mertler (2014) and summarized or paraphrased below are as follows:

- A process that refines education by including change

- Involving educators working collaboratively and in participative ways to improve their individual practices
- Influential and convincing as it is completed by teachers for teachers
- Practical and relevant to classroom teachers
- Developing critical reflection about one's teaching and about education generally
- A planned, systematic approach to understanding the learning process
- Requiring the "testing" of ideas about education
- Based on a cyclical process of planning, acting, developing, and reflecting

In using Action Research methods, therefore, this research project implemented change within one school by introducing peer observations as a method for professional development. A small group of teachers worked collaboratively to develop a peer observation protocol that would promote professional growth by improving instruction as well as allowing professional conversations amongst colleagues. Engaging a sample of teachers at this school as research participants was intended to help ensure that the findings and recommendations would be readily accepted by others teachers in this school, and the focus was on developing a practical solution that could be readily implemented. The methods enabled the research participants not only to observe their peers but to reflect critically on their own teaching practices and consider ways of improving these. Overall, the study was based on a systematic process of data collection, analysis, implementation and reflection which involved the "testing" of the phenomenon of peer observation in this school setting. Once the protocol was tested and fully developed by the small group of teachers, the peer observation process was implemented school-wide as a professional development tool.

Context and Participants

This action research study took place in Broadway County (a pseudonym), in the southeastern part of the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2016, Broadway County has a population of approximately 89,594 residents. Approximately 70% of the County population is White, 22% is African-American, 5% is Hispanic or Latino, and 3% is American Indian and Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, or two or more races. Broadway County School District serves approximately 13,216 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. According to the Broadway County School District Profile, approximately 79% of the District population is White, 36% is African-American, 9% is Hispanic, 1.3% is Asian, and 4.5% is other. Nearly 52% of students receive free and/or reduced lunch. Eden Middle School (a pseudonym), in Broadway County serves 999 students in grades six through eight. According to the Eden Middle School Report Card (2017) the school population consists of 27.7% of students in poverty, 15.6% have disabilities, and 26.3% of students are served by the gifted and talented program. Eden Middle School had a state rating of excellent between 2012 and 2014. Data from 2015 to 2017 was not available at the time of this study as schools and districts will not be rated for state accountability purposes until 2018.

The research participants included seven cross-discipline teachers teaching grades from six to eight. These individuals also constituted the members of the Curriculum and Instruction Focus Team already created by the principal and the instructional coach at Eden Middle School. The Curriculum and Instruction Focus Team's purpose is to

improve professional understanding of the curriculum and to develop ways that teachers can improve their instruction.

More specifically, the sample of research participants contained three sixth grade teachers, two seventh grade teachers, and two eighth grade teachers. The sixth grade female math teacher has taught for sixteen years. The sixth grade female science teacher has taught for ten years and has a master's degree in education. The sixth grade male social studies teacher has taught for ten years. The seventh grade female science teacher has taught for five years. The other seventh grade female science teacher has taught for six years and has a master's degree in education. The eighth grade female science teacher has taught for seven years and has a master's degree. The eighth grade female social studies teacher has taught for twenty-one years.

Formerly, I was an assistant principal at Eden Middle School; however, when this research was conducted, I was no longer employed with the school or district as I had already moved to a different state. For the purpose of this study, my role was that of a facilitator. For effective implementation of professional development, it is important that leaders work as facilitators rather than instructors (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997; Hargreaves, 2007). To promote adult learning, being a facilitator establishes a more democratic atmosphere with collective influence and authority (Hawley & Valli, 1999). As the facilitator, I helped the participants to understand their objectives, provided a supportive environment, facilitated communications, and assisted them in planning how to achieve the objectives, while remaining neutral throughout the discussions and overall research process.

Research Methods

Data Collection Tools

In this action research project, two main sources of data, transcripts of individual interviews and focus group meetings, were collected in the natural school setting by the researcher and used to study the experiences and perspectives of the teachers in order to address the research problem. Data were collected over a five-month period in five phases that included two interviews and three focus group meetings.

A focus group consists of participants who typically have similar characteristics related to the topic of study and can add rich, descriptive data to the research (Cheng, 2008). Focus groups offer an expansion on the problem and provide the researcher with a more comprehensive understanding of the issue from the participants' perspective (Vaughn et. al., 1996). The focus group used in this research included seven teachers that were previously assigned to the school's Curriculum and Instruction Focus Team. The focus group met on three different occasions to identify the factors that are important when completing peer observations in order to provide effective professional development. These meetings used Riel's model which consisted of planning by developing a protocol using these factors, taking action and collecting evidence by completing peer observations, and then reflecting on the protocol and the factors which involved changing the protocols when necessary. For this research, the focus groups knowledge and range of experiences aided in identifying important factors to peer observations to allow for effective professional growth.

Qualitative interviews are utilized to acquire detailed knowledge from participants about specific experiences. Two individual interviews with each of the seven participants,

a preliminary interview and a follow-up interview, were conducted to generate responses and to identify significant themes relevant to the research questions. An interview guide was prepared for both interviews containing specific, general, and open-ended questions to be asked. According to Patton (2002), the advantages of this semi-structured format are that asking the same questions of each teacher decreases the need for interviewer judgement during the interview, minimizing interviewer effects; the interview is extremely focused, making efficient use of the teachers' time; responses to uniform questions are easy to find and compare, and the interview instrument is available for anyone who needs it. These interviews were intended to elicit views and opinions of peer observations and professional development from the participants. Information from the interviews were recorded by making handwritten notes, by audiotaping, and later being transcribed, as well as emailed by participants.

The preliminary interviews (see Appendix A) provided background information related to the participants' professional experience; beliefs about professional development; experience with observations in general and with peer observations, and perceptions of the new peer observation process within the participants' school. The follow-up interviews (see Appendix B) allowed participants the opportunity to discuss their experience throughout the process of implementing peer observations. The follow-up interviews investigated the experience of peer observation and its perceived relevance to the participants' own teaching; peer observations as professional development; the factors that are important in peer observation, and the perceived benefits and challenges involved in conducting peer observations.

Data Collection Procedures

Permission to conduct this research study at Eden Middle School was given by the principal. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for the names of the county, district, school, and the participants involved in the study. Eden Middle School has designated focus teams in which teachers are placed by administration based on education degrees, strengths, abilities, and knowledge. The instructional coach chose the Curriculum and Instruction Focus Team to work with in this study. This focus team's purpose is to improve professional understanding of the curriculum and to develop ways that teachers can improve their instruction. A preliminary interview was conducted to understand the participants' educational backgrounds, knowledge about peer observations, and thoughts on professional development.

At the first focus group meeting, the team's chair spoke about the desire of the principal to implement peer observations as professional development. The principal's reasons for doing so were explained as: giving teachers an opportunity to see the positive things happening throughout the school; removing the feeling of isolation that many teachers may have, and allowing teachers to grow as professionals by learning from their coworkers, hence, providing professional development in teaching and instruction. As the researcher, I was introduced and given the opportunity to speak. I introduced myself, explained my background, discussed my academic program and role in this study and gave a brief overview of the purpose of observations drawing on the literature. For example, I explained that observations are used to facilitate teacher growth and improve teacher quality through professional development and collaboration (Lam, 2001). Peer observations enhance communication, collaboration, self-confidence, reflection, and

improvements in professional practice (Kohut et. al., 2007). Meaningful professional development enhances classroom instruction (Burk, 2013), therefore, peer observations, as a form of professional development promote collaboration and often lead to higher teacher performance (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004).

A timeline of meetings and events were then discussed (see Appendix C). The discussion began of the important factors to consider when completing a peer observation. A form was created along with a set of criteria (see Appendix D and E). To test the criteria and form, teachers were given a schedule to observe one another within a weeks' time. Each teacher was required to observe at least one teacher, with a second observation optional due to time constraints. In the event the participants all completed the two observations.

During the second focus group meeting which took place after the teacher observations had been completed, the participants discussed the positive and negative aspects of the current criteria and observation form. The criteria and observation form were then revised based on the outcomes of this discussion (Appendix F and G). Over the next two weeks, the teachers were required to complete two observations, one was assigned and the other was a teacher of choice within group of teachers.

Four weeks after the second focus group meeting, we met once again. During this meeting, the teachers discussed the positive about the current criteria and observation form and decided to keep what was in place as they felt this protocol would give teachers the optimal professional development possible through peer observations. At the final focus group meeting, the principal approved the focus team to present peer observations to the faculty in December. During the second semester, all teachers would be required

to complete two peer observations, the first scheduled and the second by choice of teacher. The focus team would be in charge of sharing in a December meeting the final protocol (see Appendix H) and the document. Teachers would be required to turn in a copy of their observation form to administration for the purpose of ensuring that the experiences and learning generated by of peer observation could be used to contribute to the overall learning and personal development of all teachers in the school. They would also be expected to implement in their own classrooms any useful learning or strategies observed, and to provide feedback face to face or by email to the observed teacher within two days of the classroom observation.

Finally, follow-up interviews were completed with the research participants in January to allow participants the opportunity to discuss peer observations and their own teaching, peer observations as professional development, the factors that are important to peer observations, and the benefits and challenges to peer observations. The resulting research data was combined with that from the preliminary interviews and focus groups for the purpose of qualitative and coding in order to address the research questions of the study.

Data Analysis

Because this study was phenomenological and the intention was to explore the teachers' direct experiences of peer observation, data from interviews and the focus group meetings were collected throughout the process and coded for themes. Data from the qualitative research were collected during the Fall semester, August through January. All data was audio recorded and transcribed by a professional. The transcripts from the interviews and focus group meetings were imported into NVivo for the purpose of coding

using a thematic analysis approach (Fossey & Harvey, 2002). A two-stage inductive coding process was used, in which data from the transcripts was used to identify and define key themes and sub-themes relevant to the purpose of the study and the research questions. These were created and labelled accordingly as codes, or “nodes” in NVivo terminology, in the NVivo file. The coding tree was continually revised and refined, e.g. renaming, combining or moving codes around as each transcript was studied and allocated relevant data to the codes. The first stage of coding resulted in a large number of themes and sub-themes, with some having only a little data allocated to them. During the second stage of coding, all the themes and sub-themes were reviewed again and reallocated material between them where appropriate (e.g. combining similar codes, removing some and allocating their data to a different code, moving sub-themes to the most appropriate place on the coding tree). This process continued until the overall distribution of codes most accurately conveyed the participants’ views and experiences in ways that were aligned with the research questions. This coding tree was then used to structure the findings section outline, and to extract verbatim quotes to illustrate each point.

The coding process was thus used to identify common themes that emerged from the interview and focus group meeting transcripts. Patterns, categories, and themes were organized from simple to increasingly more complex units of information until a comprehensive set of themes was established for the purpose of narrative description of the research findings. Organizing data into a thematic design offers flexibility and is one of the most common method of analyzing and presenting qualitative data (Lodico et al., 2006). In this qualitative action research study, data analysis occurred throughout the

process of data collection and the interpretation and presentation of findings. In Chapter 4 the findings organized by key themes are presented in narrative format, including illustrative quotes from the interviews and focus groups. The headings and sub-headings correspond with the main themes/codes and sub-themes that were generated using thematic analysis. The narrative approach used to report the findings is well aligned with the action research method and intended to show how the process of creating the protocol evolved over time.

Measures of Research Quality

It is essential to ensure that research meets accepted standards of research quality. For example, the concept of validity is often used to address whether the researcher is actually investigating what they intend to investigate, while the concept of reliability refers to whether the measurement tools would generate consistent results over time (Denscombe, 2003). However, these concepts are better suited to the evaluation of quantitative research studies. Instead, Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined alternative criteria for use in assessing the quality of qualitative research as: *credibility*, or confidence that the findings appear to be credible or “true”; *dependability*, or that the same findings would be generated if the study was repeated; *transferability*, or that the findings could be applied to other settings, and *confirmability*, or that the findings have been objectively generated and not influenced by the researcher’s pre-existing beliefs or biased views (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In qualitative research, which focuses on participants as the instrument of data collection, credibility can be enhanced when the participants’ authenticity is accessed through techniques such as observations and interviews (Maxwell, 2005). In this study, it

was assumed that the participants provided honest responses to interview questions and focus group discussions. Audio recording was transcribed by a professional transcriber and checked by the researcher to retain the accuracy of these responses. Member checking also was used to help ensure that the participants' experiences were accurately represented and to address the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of participants' responses. To preserve the participants' anonymity and privacy, no names were used when reporting on findings and pseudonyms were also used to refer to the school and school district in which the study took place. The triangulation of data from interviews and focus group discussions were also used to alleviate threats to the quality of the research and to improve dependability by confirming the findings using different sources. The researcher may every effort to remain objective and not to influence the overall outcomes of the study, in order to maintain a high standard of confirmability.

Action research conclusions apply to the specific individuals and places used in the study, which causes limitations. This action research consists of a small sample size of seven teachers, middle school level only, located in a middle to upper class, large suburban community with the focus on participants that teach only three grade levels. Since action research methods were used, the detailed findings and recommendations are specific to the school in which the research was conducted, but it can nonetheless be expected that the overall approach and broad findings will be transferable to similar school settings. For this research to be transferable to other settings and populations, the procedures need to be carefully studied for the likelihood of similar results in different settings and with different participants (Stringer, 2007).

Ethical Considerations

Participants in this study were solely comprised of adults. There was no harm or risk to any participant as a result of the study being conducted. The researcher obtained permission from the IRB as well as the school principal to work with consenting teachers. The findings of the data were drafted only in collective terms, with participants not being distinguishable by their responses in order to ensure confidentiality, and no demographic characteristics being used by which individuals could be recognized.

The Action Research Process

The focus of this research project was on the experience of a small percentage of teachers within one school, which was best suited to an action research, qualitative design. In this project, research took place within the school where participants experienced peer observations as a professional development tool. Data was collected by the researcher through interviews and by facilitating a series of focus groups. The researcher reviewed and analyzed all data and organized it into themes, with an emphasis on understanding the meanings and understanding that the participants hold about peer observations and professional development rather than the findings of previous research. Changes were made to the research design and the solution as the process developed. Multiple perspectives, the various factors involved, and the bigger picture were all reported.

Action research is constructed on the principle that a change or action will result from the project (Mertler, 2014). According to Creswell (2005), the significant feature of developing an action plan is that the researcher has an approach for testing, implementing, or putting into practice the changes ensuing from the findings of an action

research project. In this research project, the final protocol created by the focus group of teachers for peer observations will be implemented school-wide as a professional development tool during the spring semester. The instructional coach will facilitate the presentation of peer observations to all the teachers by communicating to them that the Curriculum and Instruction Focus Team created a useful observation tool and criteria that will provide professional development among teachers by encouraging self-reflection and gathering ideas on instructional strategies. The focus group of teachers that aided in the research will be available to answer any questions or concerns. This protocol will be used during the second semester and revisited with all teachers at the end of the school year.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has set out the methodology for the study, including the overall rationale for the methods used; the context of the study and the research participants, and the data collection tools and procedures used, the analysis methods, the measures taken to ensure the study meets high standards of qualitative research, ethical implications and a summary of the action research approach on which the study is based. The following chapter sets out the findings of the research.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to collaborate with teachers to develop a peer observation protocol that would lead to meaningful professional development that promotes teacher growth and collaboration. In fulfilling this purpose, the researcher collaborated with a team of middle school teachers to develop a peer observation protocol and examined their perceptions of the observations promoting professional development and collaboration. The research questions were intended to generate understanding of the important factors to consider in peer observation in order to provide effective professional development which will enable teachers to improve their instruction and collaboration.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What factors do middle school teachers identify as important when completing peer observations?
2. To what extent is the peer observation method perceived by teachers as meaningful professional development that promotes teacher growth?

The use of action research methods allowed teachers to work collaboratively to develop a professional development tool that enhanced their instruction and collaboration. Specifically, Riel's action research model was used as a framework for the study. The resulting research design consisted of a) planning by developing an observation protocol based on identified important factors; b) taking action and collecting

evidence by completing peer observations, and c) reflecting on the protocol and the factors identified as important in peer observation and making changes as necessary. Within this action research framework, qualitative interviews and focus groups were used to examine the experiences and perspectives of the teachers in ways that would enable the research questions to be addressed. These stages of data collection corresponded with the planning and reflection phases of the action research design, with the “action” phase consisting of the trial observations conducted by the teachers.

The data from the interviews and focus groups was analyzed using a process of thematic analysis facilitated by the NVivo qualitative research software. The top level themes and first level sub-themes were identified deductively (top down) from the main categories of information and corresponding questions covered in the interviews and focus groups. Emerging sub-themes relevant to these key questions were identified in an inductive (bottom up) process from the research data (interview and focus group transcripts). An iterative process of several stages of coding was used until the final distribution of defined sub-themes was thought to most accurately reflect the reported perceptions and experiences of the research participants, as shown in Table 1.

The chapter presents a mainly descriptive account of the findings relating to each main theme, with these being interpreted and discussed further in Chapter 5. The findings are organized within the chapter in sections corresponding with the three main stages of this action research study and discussed by the main themes and sub-themes shown in Table 4.1. In some sections, an indication is given of whether a majority or minority of participants expressed particular views or cited certain factors. It was not possible to cite specific numbers giving particular types of responses because the data

collection and analysis process did not allow for individuals to be easily identified from the focus group transcripts. Citing specific numbers is in any case not recommended in qualitative thematic analysis, since identified themes can often be meaningful and relevant even if based on the responses of just a small number of participants (Pyett, 2003).

Table 4.1 Themes and sub-themes

Category	Main Theme	Sub-Theme	
Views on and experiences of peer observation	General views on what constitutes optimal professional development	Providing practical learning for immediate use	
		Based on best practices	
		Tailored to own needs	
		Timely	
	Prior experiences of being evaluated through peer observation	Helpful experiences	
		Unhelpful experiences	
	Other prior experiences of observation		
	Expected benefits and perceived purpose of peer observation		Learning and gaining ideas from other teachers
			Mutual benefits for observed and observer teachers
			Increased awareness of standards and expectation
Increased dialogue and community among teachers			
Professional skills development			
Concerns about peer observation		Being perceived as an evaluation	
		Being ineffective	

		Exacerbating time pressures
Protocol and Process Development (planning stage)	Developing the peer observation process	Appropriate scheduling
		Observing a pre-agreed focus area
		Selection of teachers for observation
	Developing the peer observation protocol	Content - Information not required
		Content - Information required
		Other suggested content
		Format - Benefits of open question format
		Format - Structure and checklists
		Format - Type of document
	Developing follow up processes	Follow up conversation to discuss observations
Follow-up tailored to situation		
Importance of positive feedback		
Ongoing mentoring		
Implementation - Expected support needed	Allocation of time or coverage	
	Support from other teachers or administrators	
Implementation - How to persuade teachers of benefits		
Implementation - Whether peer observation is expected to be supported school-wide	School wide support expected	
	School wide support not expected	
Post observation feedback	Main challenges experienced	Time pressures
		Giving appropriate feedback
		Insufficient time

(reflection stage)	Most valuable aspects	Useful discussions with colleagues Completing the protocol Notes made during observation Providing feedback to teacher observed
	Perceived benefits	Learning about teaching strategies and methods

Views on and Experiences of Peer Observation

The findings discussed in this section draw primarily on the individual interviews conducted at the outset of the study and relate to the participants’ general views on and prior experiences of peer observation as a professional development method. The research participants were asked a range of questions intended to explore their views on the ideal characteristics of professional development for teachers, and on their prior experiences of and views on peer observation. This was intended to help provide insights into what they might be looking for from a peer observation initiative, and how their previous experiences might have influenced their views on the use of peer observation for this purpose.

Views on Optimal Forms of Professional Development

When asked how they would characterize an optimal form of professional development for teachers, the teachers’ responses fell into four key themes: providing immediate learning for practical use, tailored to their own development needs, based on best practices, and timely (Table 1). There was a general consensus that professional development activities should have a practical focus with immediate learning outcomes, a finding that seems to be in line with theories of adult learning (e.g. Lindeman, 1926) which stress that adults learn best when the information is perceived to be directly

relevant to their daily lives. For example, one teacher stated, “The best professional development includes practical take-aways and strategies that can be easily modified for any content area”, and another explained, “Optimal professional development to me is something I can take back with me and use in my classroom in the next few days. I like step by step ideas and lessons with examples”. Also illustrating the need for learning relevant to them, nearly all of the teachers also stressed that optimal professional development activities should be concise and tailored to their personal needs as teachers, e.g. “Specific to my needs for growth as an educator. Currently it would include technology as a focus”.

Other points that were cited by one or more teachers were that professional development should be based on best practices and should be planned in ways sensitive to the time pressures faced by most teachers. As one explained, they should include “Honest discussions about successful and not so successful instructional techniques in the classroom” as well as “Time to actually then plan using effective methods or top rated programs”. Another teacher highlighted the importance of professional development activities that are timely, in view of the pressures facing teachers but also their need for ongoing development: “It needs to provide time to implement the new strategies and concepts, but not so infrequent that teachers aren't continuing to grow or challenge themselves.”

Previous Experiences of Peer Observation

When asked about their previous experiences of being observed in the classroom, most of the participants indicated that they had experienced peer observation in the past, but in the main these exercises had been for the purpose of evaluating their performance

and not for professional development reasons. There were mixed views on the value of observation for evaluation purposes, though the majority of teachers who had experienced this expressed negative perceptions of it, indicating that they learned very little from the exercise or that they found it uncomfortable being observed in this way. One teacher stated, “The only time I've been evaluated was during the ADEPT process, and I don't think I gained much from it other than relief that I passed.” Another teacher reported, “In most cases it was a very quick check-list style observation that lacked critical feedback.” Only a few indicated that they had found observation evaluations helpful, and the following quote indicates that this exercise was perceived to be valuable when it involved receiving constructive feedback from the observer rather than just an evaluative score.

The most help I received was from having one on one meetings with a mentor about what she observed. I think having one person continually coming to observe me and having that same person take the time to sit down and actually really discuss what she saw and give me ideas and options on how to improve was more beneficial than going to randomly observe teachers within the school.

Some participants also had previous experiences of peer observation not just for evaluation purposes but as a formal or informal professional development initiative. One explained, for example “We used to have to observe 2 teachers per semester and give forms to admin. I have also observed teachers just because they wanted/needed help with a topic, classroom management, etc.” and another described their previous experiences of peer observation as “very informal; just a pop in and watch to be able to respond to a set of prompts”. Another explained, however, that they had been required to conduct regular

peer observations as a developmental activity when they first began teaching, and found these experiences helpful and enjoyable: “My first few years as a teacher we were required to go observe teachers a couple of times a semester. You would do a simple write up and leave it in the teacher’s box I always enjoy going and seeing what others are doing in their classroom.”.

Perceived Benefits of and Concerns about Peer Observation

Based on their prior experiences and knowledge of peer observation, the participants were asked for their views on the potential benefits and the purpose of peer observation. By far the most commonly cited type of response related to learning from and gaining new ideas for use in their own classrooms from other teachers. One explained, described, and expanded on these perceived benefits in the following way: “Ideas on how to improve myself as a teacher and learner. Hopefully with these ideas I can make my classroom instruction better and my classroom environment more engaging to prompt increased performance and understanding among my students”, and similarly another identified the main benefit as being “To take what others are doing in their classroom (the good) and incorporate it into my classroom.”. One of the teachers explained that “Teachers benefit from watching other teacher's strengths and strategies. They can be inspired to try new things and evaluate the way their classroom runs.” Several stressed the importance of this being a mutually beneficial process for both teachers involved in the observation, for example: “Learning from other teachers, whether that is the observer learning something or the teacher getting observed learns something after their post observation discussion.”

Similarly, peer observation is seen as an important tool for self-evaluation and self-growth as a teacher. One teacher explained, “Hopefully with these ideas I can make my classroom instruction better and my classroom environment more engaging to prompt increased performance and understanding among my students.” Another teacher stated, “No one is perfect and education is constantly changing so we have to as well. It is nice to have peers and administrators help us along the way.” Some pointed out that, when new to an area as a result of reassignment or initial placement, it can be valuable to observe a teacher experienced in a certain content area or grade level. The teacher discussed the importance of observing veteran teacher to “become aware of grade level standards and expectations, management ideas, it is inspiring to see the hard work and great ideas of coworkers.”

When asked about any concerns they had regarding peer observation, many expressed the view that it might be seen primarily as an evaluation, which would make teachers uncomfortable. Again the idea was conveyed by several of the participants that peer observations should be mutually beneficial, with opportunities for follow up discussions between the teachers, but that the main benefits are often experienced by the observer rather than the observed teacher and it should be designed to facilitate this rather than as an evaluation tool. As one teacher stated, “I worry that people will feel like they are being evaluated. I think it should be more about the observer trying to learn something for themselves than the observed feeling evaluated.” Others had the concern that peer observation may be ineffective in achieving its goals; for example, if the teachers do not learn anything from one another or are unable to give helpful feedback, “Sometimes the peer that is doing the observing won't have much to say and the teacher

won't really get anything out of it either.” The concern about peer observation as an evaluative tool was also expressed by another teacher who said, “If I suck at classroom management and the person that comes to observe me isn't much better, what is that really going to do for me?”

One of the participants was more skeptical about the value of formal peer observation initiatives in general, and suggested that informal conversations between teachers can be more helpful in practice, particularly given the time constraints usually placed on formal observations: “A lot of times just meeting and having a conversation about what happens in the classroom is best [...] An observation is just a short period of time and you can't really gather too much during that time.”

In summary, the findings of the study relating to the existing perceptions and views of the teachers regarding peer observation and professional development indicated that most of these teachers had experienced some form of peer observation in the past, either as a developmental or evaluative tool. Most did not feel that peer observation should be used for evaluative purposes and expressed a concern that it could be perceived this way. Instead, the participants acknowledged that it has a number of potential benefits as a professional development activity, mainly for the observer rather than the observed teacher. This appears to be because the main perceived benefit of peer observation is the ability to learn new ideas and methods that can be applied in the observer's own classroom. However, some also stressed that peer observation can be mutually beneficial, with the observer also providing informal and constructive feedback, but not formal evaluation scores, to the observed teacher.

Development of Peer Observation Protocol and Process

The findings presented in this section are based on the three group discussions in which the peer observation protocol and recommended process for completion of this were developed, with trial observations taking place in between the three meetings so that the participants could reflect on their experiences of these and feed their views into the evolving protocol and observation process criteria.

The group discussions generated many valuable findings which informed the development of the recommended peer observation protocol and process. These are summarized in this sub-section by key themes aligned with the interview/focus group questions which correspond to the main stages to be addressed when developing a peer observation initiative: the advance planning process, the content and format of the protocol (form for completion), the actual classroom observation procedures, the follow up and feedback mechanisms, and considerations relating to the overall implementation of the initiative (see Table 1). The findings relating to each of these main themes as discussed below correspond with the sub-themes that emerged from the research data in relation to these main themes and are also shown in Table 1.

Advance Planning Process

Three main issues were identified as being of importance in the advance planning process: the selection of teachers for observation, the scheduling of observations, and whether to identify a focus area in advance for observation.

The proposed initiative for consideration by the participants involved observation of two teachers in each case: one selected by the school administration, and the other chosen voluntarily by the observing teacher. Overall, the participants agreed that this

approach was sensible, expressing the view that although it was most helpful to choose a teacher who they believed they could learn something useful from; the risk, however, was that those teachers who were perceived to be most effective would be frequently chosen for observations while less experienced teachers would not be visited and would therefore miss out on the experience. One teacher stated, “I’d want to see somebody that I know that I could take something away from.”

There was some discussion about whether it was more helpful to observe a teacher from one’s own content area or grade level or a faculty member with different experiences. No overall consensus on this was reached, but it was recognized that practical considerations such as having convenient planning time available for observations and follow-up discussions would also have to be taken into account. An eighth grade science teacher explained:

I think it would be good if like AP science, if half of us paired up with seventh grade science and then half of us paired up with sixth grade science. Because when I’m planning, they’re teaching, and when they’re planning, I’m teaching. We can swap it that way. If we start with the same content at least we have a general idea of what’s supposed to be happening.

The participants also discussed the relative merits of scheduling observations in advance or arriving unexpectedly. Some suggested having a shared schedule to facilitate planning of observations. The main conclusion was that it would be better to schedule in advance to ensure they visited at a time when they would be likely to learn something useful from the activity being taught, or alternatively when an agreed “focus area,” which the observed had requested feedback on, was being taught.

Whether to require an identified area of focus in advance was also discussed. Some participants suggested that the teacher to be observed should reflect and share a specific area in advance: “If they know that’s where they’re wanting to grow and become better at and you’re coming in just to look specifically for that and giving them feedback, I think they would take it a lot better because it’s where they want to grow.” Another teacher reiterated the benefit of predetermined focus areas saying, “I really love the idea of everyone putting places they could grow, or even places where they need more ideas. Even like one or two areas of focus that you’re kind of watching for when you’re in the room. I think that would be really great.”

As identified earlier, some participants indicated that they felt the main purpose of the observation should be to identify ideas and best practices from the teacher being observed, rather than giving the observed teacher feedback. “If I’m going to go take my time to go see a teacher, I want to learn something. I want to say, ‘Hey, that’s amazing! I want to take it back to my classroom and use it.’” Another teacher stated, “I’m more of the mindset of I’m going in there because I know that they’re good. I want to see what they do so I can pull that into my room.” These findings indicate that format and method of the observation needs to be quite flexible to meet individual needs, and that while it may be important for some teachers to identify a focus area in advance for the purpose of observation, for others this is not seen as critical.

Development of Peer Observation Protocol and Criteria

Over the course of the three group and the intervening trial peer observations, the draft protocol evolved to reflect participants’ views on the most effective format and

content of the observation expectation template, and the general criteria to be followed in the peer observation process.

Although in the initial discussion some highlighted the benefits of having a structured, checklist format for the observation protocol, the group achieved a general consensus over the course of the three meetings, and reflecting their experiences of the trial observations, that it is most helpful to have a more unstructured protocol with open questions that could be completed in short answer or paragraph form. This format provides a general guide to the types of information to be collected but also allows flexibility and generates more useful findings for both teachers. As one explained: “I think if it’s open ended, if it’s kind of wide open you can see what they kind of want. If you don’t see that then you can still have some space. Or if you don’t have any suggestions for how to implement project based learning in whatever they’re teaching, you can still find something else to say.”

The early draft included a larger number of specific questions; through a process of identifying the most useful prompts and those not required by every observation, the observation tool was eventually narrowed down to several more general questions (see Appendices D and F). It was agreed that certain types of basic information were important to collect. After discussion, deliberation, and decisions, the participants chose to keep several items from the first draft protocol including: observer, teacher observer, grade, subject, time, and teaching topic.

Beyond this, the participants narrowed down the original ten draft questionnaire items to just four, which were believed to adequately capture the information required to ensure that the observation would be helpful to both the observer and the teacher being

observed (Appendix F) The four items which were identified or retained for inclusion in the final draft of the protocol were:

- What was observed? (instructional strategies, student participation, technology use, etc.)
- What was observed that you could use in your own classroom?
- Questions, comments, reflections, and/or topics to discuss.
- Follow-up date and type (email, face-to-face, etc.):

Those items from the first draft protocol (Appendix D) which were excluded from the final version as they were felt to be inappropriate, unhelpful, or modified to fit into the included questions were:

- Learning Intentions
- What are students doing? (listening, speaking, reading, writing, etc.)
- What is the level of student engagement in the room? Provide evidence.
- Make note of important elements of classroom environment (Materials available for student use, routines/procedures in place, student work displayed, desk set-up):
- What technology is being used in the classroom? How?
- Based on the area of focus of the observation, what was observed?

Upon further conversation with the participating stakeholders leading the initiative, it was evident that the majority agreed on several main reasons for excluding or changing the original items. Many of the teachers involved felt that certain aspects were not necessary or relevant. Anecdotal notes about classroom environment were one of those items; one teacher quipped, “Who cares what your desks are set up like?” Another

area seen as unimportant was the posted learning intention; “I don’t think it matters to me because when I go into a room if I’m going in there for a peer observation I want to learn something from that-- and the learning intention, I could care less.” Many felt that a posted learning intention, if never mentioned, referenced, used, or outside of the observers’ content may be ineffective. Likewise, technology being a required questionnaire prompt stirred many thoughts as it did with this teacher: “So what if there’s no technology being used? What if they’re sitting around discussing a novel and there’s no technology being used at all.”

Of concern to the participants was the potential subjectivity of questions, which were seen by some as primarily ascertaining the level of student engagement. “If I see a teacher giving notes or giving a lecture if all the kids are listening and taking notes, I consider that high level, they’re all engaged in - some people might be. Well, they’re just sitting there at their desk not really doing anything.” Without extensive training on data collection related to student engagement, the concern was that it becomes a question of whether the students look like they are paying attention and learning, making this more of an evaluative question than mere observation.

Throughout the discussion, strong opinions emerged about identifying, sharing, and gathering information on someone’s area of focus. There was much conversation about the transparency and comfort levels that would have to be in place for many teachers to openly share their struggles or admit their own faults. It was noted that there would also be staff members who neglected to see any area of improvement for themselves, giving the peer nothing to look for or assist with if no weakness or area of growth was identified. This would nullify the purpose of observations. One teacher

suggested that this issue might be overcome by removing the required aspect of focus areas: “I don’t like having to choose that beforehand, I would rather just go see a teacher and then see what comes up as I observe and then make a mental note or in the observation form say, ‘We should talk about this.’”. Overall, it was felt that whether or not to identify a focus area in advance should be left to the teachers concerned, and not made a specific protocol item.

Other themes arising from the discussions about the required content of the protocol included the importance of providing at least some positive as well as constructive feedback yet ensuring that this information is not conveyed as critical or evaluative. When asked what this would look like on the protocol template, the teachers said, “I think simple things like one compliment and maybe one suggestion” and “Make sure people put a compliment on every observation. If it’s not on there, they won’t do it.” This was also an added attempt to create and foster teacher buy-in, by reassuring teachers that they would gain something productive and positive from inviting in a peer for an observation.

Follow-up Processes

One of the main areas of focus in the discussions became the format by which follow-up or feedback from the peer observations should be shared, the perceived value of a conversation versus written feedback and the practicality of each for more useful and in-depth discussions; “If I wanted to talk about, ‘That was good; can you show me where you got that or can you tell me this?’ Then I’d like to go and meet with somebody.” Others thought a face-to-face conversation was not needed and that a quick thank-you email to express appreciation and a positive thought would suffice.

A second theme that emerged was the importance of ensuring that feedback is tailored to the situation and needs of the teacher observed. One teacher explained this by using a teacher's need for assistance with classroom management saying, “‘Hey, if you know you struggle with classroom management, get a peer to come in and observe you and tell you this is how you can help.’ Or, you can do it the other way, vice versa. Go in and say, ‘Hey, I know you’re really good at problem based learning, I’m coming in to observe you to see what you do.’” Both of these approaches make the observation and feedback more meaningful to the observed and observer.

Third, seen as a much needed piece, crucial to the success of the peer observation system was the importance of always providing at least some positive feedback, as highlighted by the following quote from one of the teachers:

I have concerns over being critical of someone else. I do think that educators need to constantly be improving their craft but I also know the realities of the demand. So I want to give feedback that is positive... However I don't want to just compliment them but challenge them to think about their strategies from a different perspective.

It was also suggested that the use of an ongoing mentoring arrangement might be valuable, to provide enhanced opportunities to learn and grow together and build collegiality and trust. The following quote highlights the perceived potential benefits of an ongoing relationships rather than one-off observations:

You would basically work on really establishing rapport with one person and making the communication better on the critiques and the suggestions and you meet with them separately after. Then after maybe a time ... you move onto

someone else so you're actually there seeing the progress you make the first time they give suggestions and the next time ... I feel like I've had so many random people step into my room and tell me one thing and then what I can work on and it's done and I never hear from them again.

Implementation Considerations

In their initial interviews, the participants were asked for their views on whether peer observation would be readily accepted across the school and to identify what forms of support might be needed to support its implementation. The participants were split between those who expressed the view that peer observation would not be accepted by all teachers and those who believed that it would receive widespread support from many if not all teachers. For example, one of the teachers falling into the first group explained, "Completed, yes. Supported, no. There are folks who believe their time is 'too valuable' or there's nothing they can learn. That mindset must change first." Teachers who fell into the second category stated, "I think the teachers that want to learn and improve will support them. Others will look at them as another thing to do" and "I think that there will be a mutual respect cultivated amongst teachers if we can get the chance to see each other in action. We will be able to see our strengths more easily and see what we can grow in as a community." A third teacher in this group added, "I feel that most teachers are receptive to improving their teaching practices and would like to be observed by colleagues, not only administrators." Some argued that it would need to be implemented well to persuade teachers of the benefits. One teacher stated, "I think it will get the support of most once it is laid out for everyone and people can see the benefit."

Responding to that statement was the participant who summed up both sides of the conundrum:

Yes- if it is required or if a teacher has interest in going to see a teacher they know does great things based on word of mouth. However, if it is not required I don't know if many teachers will see a point in going to watch a teacher that teaches a completely different grade level and subject when it would be more beneficial to just sit down and meet and talk about what is used in the classroom and any instructional techniques or classroom management techniques that they may implement. Honestly, it all comes down to time and interest.

When asked what types of support would be needed to help ensure the success of the proposed peer observation initiative, two main factors were identified: the provision of adequate time within teachers' already full schedule, and adequate support from other teachers and administrators. One reported obstacle to overcome is securing coverage for classes when necessary so that teachers could complete observations especially "in order to see teachers who teach the same content or the same age level as you" and sufficient time allocated for post-conferences as "pressing things absorb planning period time so sometimes it takes a couple of weeks before it is possible to have the time for a peer observation."

Participants also identified the need for adequate support and commitment from teachers and administrators. When asked for their views on how to persuade other teachers of the benefits of peer observation, participants stressed the importance of developing and conveying a clear vision for the initiative and clearly communicating the benefits that they would be likely to secure through participation. Teachers in the sessions

expressed the value of consistently “explaining the vision for them and purpose behind them so teachers buy in” while reminding the staff “this is for you to get something out of it, not for the person you’re observing to get something out of it.” Establishing the ground rule “that people might be in your room, but they’re not judging what you’re doing. It’s going to be they’re looking to see you do good things” warms the faculty to the idea of observing and being observed, according to one of the participants, a view that supports the use of peer observation primarily for the professional development of the observer.

Based on the focus group discussions, an initial draft set of criteria for the overall peer observation process was revised slightly (see Appendices E and G), with the main changes being the removal of the requirement to agree a focus area in advance, and to conduct a “semi-unannounced” observation. The requirement for a follow-up discussion within two days of the observation was also revised to specify that this can take the form of an email or conversation. The final criteria also indicated that the first observation would be of an assigned teacher while the second could be of the observer’s own choice of teacher. The full final set of criteria consisted of the following:

- Save the Google Doc to your Docs so everyone does not have access to your docs.
- The observation should be 10-20 minutes depending on what information needs to be gathered.
- The first observation is assigned. The second observation is your choice (use only teachers on the Focus Team).
- Follow-up with the teacher within 2 days of the observation. Follow-up can be an email or conversation depending on the need.
- File the written observation form in your records.

In summary, the study was successful in generating useful findings relating to the development of the peer observation protocol and the recommended processes for planning, conducting and following up observations. A draft peer observation protocol and peer observation criteria were developed on the basis of these findings subsequently refined in focus group discussions following two rounds of trial peer observations. Other relevant findings arising from post observation feedback (the reflective phase of the action research study) are discussed in the final findings section below.

Post Observation Feedback

The final sub-section presents the findings from the individual interviews conducted after completing a peer observation, which investigated their views on this experience and how it might be improved. In order to help refine the protocol and the recommended peer observation process, each research participant observed one of the other participants in his/her classroom using the draft protocol and were interviewed individually about the experiences of doing so. These were also discussed as a group in the final discussion session. The main findings are summarized in this sub-section by several key themes: perceived benefits of the observation, challenges experienced, and recommendations for improving the protocol or process.

Having carried out an observation, all of the participants indicated that they would recommend these as a valuable form of professional development because of the important learning and sharing of ideas that they facilitated. “Teachers usually have great ideas but rarely get to share them with people outside their department or grade level” so this was seen as an excellent opportunity to glean and gather strategies and teaching methods.

By far the most frequently cited benefit was learning new approaches that they could try out in their own classrooms; nearly all the participants gave this type of response when asked about benefits. Several stressed that it was more important to learn about teaching strategies or methods, regardless of the content being taught. One teacher commented, “It gives me ideas to use in my room. This can be ideas about activities, room set-up, anything.” Another shared that she “also learned about strategies that other teacher implemented that I would like to try to implement myself. Non-instructional routines were observed as well in addition to strategies and educational materials/resources that could be utilized.” Although not a field on the final protocol, the prompts allowed for observation of engagement, environment, and effective teaching, all in four open-ended questions.

Several faculty members on the peer observation initiative team also mentioned that they valued the opportunity to critically evaluate their own performance as a teacher, through observing others. Only two participants specifically mentioned that they had made concrete changes in their own classrooms following the observation, though others mentioned that they intended to do so when appropriate or at a later stage. As testament to this, a teacher shared that “through watching other teachers teach I was exposed to different programs or websites that I could use in my instruction, which I then did. Also, the way different teachers set up their procedures I took note of and tried to test out in my room.” A second teacher echoed these thoughts saying, “I took things away from the observing class and started using it the following day. I also have started using a ‘game’ that is used while waiting for others to finish.” Among those who reported that they had not yet made changes in their own classrooms, views were still positive about the

experience of conducting observations and their potential future value. For example, one teacher stated, “I don't think I changed anything because of it but I am open to doing so if I see something that I think is good.”

Around half of the participants noted that they felt the follow up conversation was the most valuable aspect of the observation. “Talking with teachers about what I saw and what others saw in their observations” gave them a chance to share ideas or receive clarification. It was a chance to talk informally “with coworkers about what really matters.”

Two main types of challenges were reported by the participants in relation to conducting the peer observations: time pressures and how to give constructive feedback. All of the teachers already have tight schedules and some found it difficult to find mutually convenient times to observe a selected teacher or to hold a follow-up discussion. Despite the overall time pressures, several of the participants reported that the ten minutes of observation they had been required to undertake was not sufficient and recommended extending this. For example, the following teacher explained, “I wanted to stay in like 25 minutes maybe just because... I mean I was just talking to him most of the time ... I wanted to talk to him because he showed me a lot of things that he uses like his portfolio and his doable forms and how he does grading. I was just kind of talking to him for a long time. But I actually learned a lot.”

However, a general consensus emerged that ten minutes should be a minimal requirement, with teachers being allowed to or encouraged to observe for longer if they felt it was helpful to do so. The prevailing attitude was one of “if you're actually wanting to develop or you're wanting to see something you're going to stay for longer, but if we

give them a minimum of 10 minutes it seems like something that's achievable and doable.”

The reported challenges of giving feedback related mainly to the importance of being non-judgmental but helpful and ensuring that the feedback was well informed. The participants found that there was a thin line between non-judgmental feedback and evaluative responses; this made several folks hesitant of future conversations about observations in the future. It was also a concern that the observer may not be as engrossed in the content and therefore “if you are observing someone in another content area you may be unfamiliar with the content and can't completely give extremely sufficient feedback on the material being taught and ideas about the content.” Both of these challenges arose in multiple participants' responses. However, as stated by one of the teachers in the group, “I personally believe if a teacher feels like they have nothing left to improve on, then they are stagnant. In the teaching profession we should always be innovating and challenging ourselves.”

Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the descriptive findings of the study, structured by three main themes: general views on and experiences of peer observations, protocol and process development and post observation feedback. These corresponded with the planning and reflective stages of the action research cycle, while the trial observations conducted by the participants constituted the action stage of the cycle. The following chapter discusses the findings and their implications and sets out a proposed action plan for the implementation of a peer observation initiative in the school which formed the research setting for this study.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As discussed in chapter 2, peer observations in general often involve a new practitioner observing a veteran in a particular field with the intent of developing or enhancing the skills of the beginner practitioner. In this study, peer observations are used to refer to a process by which teachers observe each other in the classroom in order to learn about teaching practices and to share evidence-based methods to promote professional growth. A substantial and growing body of literature demonstrates that peer observations are being increasingly adopted as a form of professional development for teachers and are contributing to improved pedagogical practices (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 2010). Within the specific context of the northern South Carolina middle school which formed the research setting for this study, however, little was known about how best to implement peer observation in practice in order to generate positive outcomes for teachers and students.

To help address this information gap, the study used a phenomenological approach and action research methods to engage a sample of teachers in this school in the development of a peer observation protocol and initiative suited to the professional development needs of teachers in this setting. The use of a phenomenological approach and action research methods enabled the researcher to explore in depth the lived experiences and in-depth views of the teacher participants relating to peer observation, while developing a practical solution focused on the specific needs of the school. The

specific purpose of action research is to explore a problem of practice, test an intervention and propose a new way forward based on what is learned (Stringer, 2007), while qualitative, phenomenological data collection methods in the form of interviews and focus groups can provide detailed insights into the views and experiences of research participants that help ensure a proposed solution is well suited to the research setting and the needs of individuals within this setting.

Specifically, the study addressed two key research questions, relating respectively to the factors seen by the teachers as important when completing a peer observation, and the extent to which the peer observation method is perceived by teachers as meaningful professional development that promotes teacher growth. The central purpose of the study was to utilize the findings to develop a peer observation protocol and practical recommendations and a proposed implementation plan for a peer observation initiative for this school.

To structure the research, Riel's (2007) progressive problem-solving action research model was used, consisting of four steps (planning, taking action, collecting evidence, and reflecting) repeated within a number of iterative cycles. As part of the action research process, the study participants conducted a trial peer observation and were interviewed about their experiences of this. Focus groups were also held for the purpose of collaborative discussions to develop the recommended protocol that would be used to record peer observations. The research was conducted in consecutive phases between August 2017 and January 2018 during which individual and group level data was collected and used in the ongoing development and refinement of recommendations for the proposed peer observation protocol and initiative. The study also generated an

improved understanding of the ways in which the research participants perceive peer observation to be an effective form of professional development for teachers.

The detailed findings of the study were presented and discussed in Chapter 4. In this chapter the key findings are summarized and used to identify recommendations for the purpose of developing an implementation plan for a peer observation initiative and protocol. In this chapter, in contrast with Chapter 4, the findings from various stages of data collection are synthesized and summarized as overall key findings corresponding with the two main research questions of the study, as shown in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 Summary of Findings Pertaining to RQs 1 and 2

Research Question	Key Findings	Sources of Data	Example quote
RQ1: What factors do middle school teachers identify as important when completing peer observations?	Focus on Practical Learning	Preliminary interviews; focus groups	“The best professional development includes practical take-aways and strategies that can be easily modified for any content area”
	Flexibility to tailor observations to own personal development needs	Focus group discussions	“Specific to my needs for growth as an educator. Currently it would include technology as a focus.”
	Having adequate time for observations and follow ups	Preliminary and post interviews	“It needs to provide time to implement the new strategies and concepts, but not so infrequent that teachers aren't continuing to grow or

			challenge themselves.”
	Having the right skills to ensure mutual benefits	Preliminary and post interviews	“Constructive criticism can be hard for teachers to give, especially when they do not have much of a relationship with the teacher that they are observing.”
RQ2. To what extent is the peer observation method perceived by teachers as meaningful professional development that promotes teacher growth?	Seen mainly as providing practical opportunities to learn about new teaching methods or strategies, rather than more general professional development strategy	Preliminary and post interviews	“To get ideas to take back to your own class.”
	More important as a learning tool for the observer, but should also be mutually beneficial	Preliminary and post interviews	“Learning from other teachers, whether that is the observer learning something or the teacher getting observed learns something after their post observation discussion”
	Facilitating community and dialogue which raises overall	Preliminary and post interviews	“We become aware of grade level standards and expectations, management ideas, it is

teaching standards
and practices

inspiring to see
the hard work
and great ideas
of coworkers.”

Research Question 1: What factors do middle school teachers identify as important when completing peer observations?

Designed to Result in Practical Learning which can be Immediately Applied

Previous literature has shown that peer observation has been used for two main reasons in the academic context: teacher development and performance management (Peel, 2005). Bell (2005) stressed the benefits of peer observation as a form of “collaborative, developmental activity” (p.3) in which teachers can share their ideas and teaching methods and reflect together on what has been learned from the process.

In this study, most of the participants perceived the main purpose of peer observation to be the opportunity to gain ideas and learning about best practices by observing another teacher in their classroom, and stressed that the main benefit was identifying practical techniques or ideas that could be immediately implemented in their own classroom. This finding repeatedly emerged from the interviews and focus groups held both before and after the trial observations completed by the participants. The observer was generally seen as the main beneficiary of peer observation, not the observed teacher: few saw the main purpose of peer observation to be receiving feedback from another teacher on their own practices. Having participated in trial peer observations during the study as both the observer and the observed teacher, all of the participants provided positive feedback on this and indicated that they had appreciated and benefited

from the learning and sharing of ideas that these trial observations had facilitated. Most reported that they had indeed learned new approaches that they could try out immediately in their own classrooms. Although one participant mentioned that it had been valuable to have the opportunity to critically evaluate their own performance through observing another teacher, indicating that they saw peer observation as a broader professional development tool, the majority viewed it more narrowly as providing practical, takeaway learning.

Despite this, the data did also indicate that many of the participants regard effective observation to be a two-way process in which the observer teacher can develop by learning about new practices while also providing constructive feedback on these to the observed teacher to enable them to improve their teaching practices. The findings indicate that there must be a focus on practical learning from peer observation in order to persuade teachers in this school of the value of allocating their limited available time to this activity, there is also a need to raise their awareness of the broader potential benefits in terms of teacher development in order to ensure that positive outcomes are achieved for the school as a whole. This should include the development of a clear purpose, vision and mission statement which is linked to the overall professional development objectives of the school and its individual teachers.

The main recommendations arising from these findings are:

- Appoint specific teacher to champion or lead the initiative and develop objectives linked to school-level professional development outcomes as well as teacher-level needs

- Develop an overall vision/mission statement for the initiative to encourage teacher buy-in and greater understanding of how peer observation can deliver benefits for the whole school
- Disseminate this information to teachers through workshops, staff meetings and other communication strategies.

Flexible – Can be Tailored to own Professional Development Needs

Previous research studies have largely focused on peer observations conducted for the purpose of teacher evaluation and performance management and using structured questionnaires with pre-defined rating criteria (e.g. Munson, 1998; Strother, 1989). As noted above, however, most of the teachers in the current study held the view that peer observation is more useful as a professional development tool in which the observer teacher gains new knowledge of teaching methods or strategies that they can apply in their own teaching practice. Over the course of three group discussions about the content of the peer observation protocol, they reached a general consensus that in this context it is better for this to be a relatively unstructured data collection tool with a small number of open questions that can be completed in textual format. The participants argued that this type of protocol provides a general guide for the types of information to be collected but also offers a great deal of flexibility for use in peer observation in a variety of different teaching contexts, and can generate useful information tailored to the specific development needs of individual teachers.

The participants also stressed the benefits of flexibility in the selection of teachers to observe in the classroom. Although there was little consensus about whether the observer and the observed teacher should be teaching the same subject or grade level, it

was generally stressed that careful matching or selection of teachers is important to ensure that peer observation can deliver the intended benefits, and that this should reflect the teachers' own perceived professional development and learning needs. In this context, a cited useful example of peer observation is when a teacher new to a subject area or grade level observes a more experienced teacher. Some participants also highlighted the value of learning about general teaching methods that could be applied in any subject area or context. Although the teachers stressed the importance of having the option to choose a teacher to observe, they also acknowledged that some deliberate assignment of teachers on the part of the school administration may be necessary in order to ensure that all teachers have an opportunity to observe and be observed.

Recommendations arising from these findings and the detailed focus group discussions, therefore, are as follows:

- The observation protocol should be of relatively unstructured format to allow flexibility in tailoring the observation to the professional development needs of teachers
- Basic data should be routinely collected only on teacher names, grade/subject and teaching topic observed and date/time of observation
- Additionally, four broad observational items should be included for textual completion: what was observed?; What could be applied in own classroom?; Questions/comments/reflections; Follow-up date and proposed format.
- Each teacher should carry out two observations (one each nine weeks), with the first teacher for observation being assigned by admin and the second being selected by the observer teacher.

- A systematic process should be developed for ensuring all teachers have opportunities to observe and be observed in the classroom.
- Processes should also be developed to enable teachers to agree on focus areas for observation if required.

Having Adequate Time and Support to Carry out Observations and Follow Ups

Previous researchers (e.g. Munson, 1998) have reported that it is often challenging for teachers to find adequate time to meet and observe their peers. This was confirmed in the present study as being one of the main concerns of the research participants about peer observation. Many of the participants reported that time pressures had been a challenge experienced during the peer observation trial, especially in relation to finding time for follow-up discussions at mutually convenient times.

Given the often-severe time pressures on teachers, a critical feature of peer observation initiatives, according to the interview and focus group findings, is that the actual observations should not be too time consuming. Despite these time pressures, there was a general consensus among the participants in their post-observation interviews that a minimum of ten minutes' classroom time was crucial to undertake an effective observation, and many participants expressed the view that more time was ideally needed. It was concluded that observers should be required to be present for at least ten minutes, and should be allowed to observe for longer if they wished to. Many of the participants also reported that they found the follow-up conversation to be the most valuable aspect of the trial peer observation that they experienced, but similarly had experienced challenges in finding the time to schedule these discussions. The risk is that if follow-up discussions do not take place soon after the observations teachers may forget

important details, or alternatively may not get around to arranging them at all. However, though face to face discussions were acknowledged by the participants in this study to be most helpful, it was also recognized that feedback comments could be usefully passed on via email if it proved too difficult to meet up soon after the observation.

These findings highlight the importance of taking into account the overall processes of planning, observation and feedback when designing a peer observation initiative in order to maximize the benefits. It particularly demonstrates the utmost importance of ensuring that adequate time is made available for participation not only in classroom observations but in follow-up discussions, but highlights the possibility of using alternative feedback mechanisms. The key recommendations based on these findings, therefore, are:

- Free up adequate time in teachers' schedules for observations and follow-up discussions and arrange classroom coverage if necessary
- Follow-up discussions should be held within 2 days of a classroom observation, ideally face-to-face by alternatively by email.
- School level processes and mechanisms should also be in place to ensure that teachers reflect on and record their peer observation experiences and the learning gained from these, and share them with the school community of teachers and administrators.

Specifically:

- Teachers should reflect on and document learning, and apply methods/strategies as appropriate in their own classroom
- Teachers should reflect on and document their experiences of using new methods/strategies

- Teachers should keep a copy of the completed observation protocol for their own records and give one to the school administrator, with the latter used for school-level knowledge management and professional development, and for evaluation of the peer observation initiative.

Having the Right Skills to Ensure Mutual Benefits

Previous researchers (e.g. Lipton & Wellman, cited in Roussin & Zimmerman, 2014) reported that peer observations are only effective in generating benefits if accompanied by adequate and useful forms of follow-up discussion, as this is the foundation for improving practice. But others have found that peer observation involves challenges such as the ability to critically reflect and to provide and accept feedback on both successful and unsuccessful teaching practices (Bell, 2005). It is therefore essential that teachers have the right skills to participate effectively in a peer observation initiative.

The findings of the current study also revealed that some of the participants encountered difficulties in providing constructive feedback to the observed teacher, demonstrating the importance of ensuring that teachers have the necessary skills and expertise to engage effectively in a peer observation initiative which is beneficial to both teachers. The reported challenges of giving feedback related mainly to the importance of being non-judgmental but helpful, and ensuring that the feedback was well informed, suggesting that teachers may need training in these areas. The main recommendations arising from this finding is that:

- The school should address any skills gaps that may hinder the success of the proposed peer observation initiative, by providing any necessary training or guidance to teachers.

Research Question 2: To what extent is the peer observation method perceived by teachers as meaningful professional development that promotes teacher growth?

Professional development of teachers has been shown to be positively associated with teacher performance (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 1999; Wood & Bennett, 2000) and student achievement (Borko and Putnam, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 1999). The second main research question of the current study therefore examined whether peer observation is perceived to be a meaningful and useful professional development activity which can promote teacher growth.

Overall, the findings from the pre- and post-observation interviews and the focus group discussions confirmed that the participants do perceive peer observation to be a useful professional development activity, but only if it is well designed and implemented in ways that deliver the types of learning they need. Some of the teachers appeared unconvinced that a formal peer observation initiative is needed, indicating that an informal chat between teachers might be just as beneficial. This indicates that a systematic peer observation initiative needs to be designed by the school in ways that are seen to contribute more to the professional development of teachers than just an informal discussion.

Another key finding that emerged strongly from both the interviews and focus group discussions, and was also highlighted in the discussion of research question one, is that many of the participants viewed the main benefit of peer observation to be the observation of practices or strategies that they could adopt immediately in their own classrooms. Although this may represent a form of professional development in terms of learning about new teaching methods, it is questionable whether it constitutes true long

term development in terms of learning and applying new skills or growing more generally as a teacher. Only one of the participants mentioned using peer observation as a way to critically evaluate and improve on their own overall performance, a more robust form of development.

These findings may reflect the participants' relatively low level of knowledge and previous experience of peer observation. Although most reported having experienced peer observation in the past, this had mainly been for the purpose of evaluation or performance management purposes and on the whole had not been found to be particularly helpful. Some highlighted the potential risk that peer observation might be seen as a formal evaluation tool in ways that would not be welcomed by teachers and might hinder its adoption by them. Through participation in this action research study, it seems that these teachers grew in appreciation of the potential professional development benefits of peer observation, but more remains to be done by the school to convince them that this will be worth a long-term investment of time and effort.

The participants themselves stressed the importance of raising awareness of the practical benefits to encourage all teachers to willingly take part in the initiative. However, while recognizing that peer observation should be a mutually beneficial process for both the observer and the observed teacher, they tended to emphasize the practical benefits for the observer rather than the receipt of constructive feedback by the observed teacher. Although earlier studies (e.g. Cosh, 2002) also claimed that it is the observer rather than the observed teacher that is the main beneficiary of the peer observation process, evidence from other research is building which shows that both the observing and the observed teacher receive benefits from peer observation (e.g. Kohut,

Burnap & Yon, 2007). Literature also indicates that teacher collaboration is one of the most important factors contributing to improved school and student-level performance, including the sharing of effective practices (Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2015). In this context, the findings of the current study suggest that it will be important for the school to design a peer observation initiative that will encourage effective collaboration within the teacher community and ensure that all teachers have opportunities not only to gain practical knowledge about teaching methods and strategies, but also that they have the opportunity to grow and develop as a result of constructive feedback received from their peers.

All of these findings highlight the importance that the school leadership takes a pro-active role in developing a peer observation initiative that contributes to the long-term professional development of individual leaders and the overall teacher community, and that adequate time and resources are allocated to this process. The current study is intended to facilitate this by developing specific recommendations and a proposed plan of action to support this, but ultimately it will be the commitment of school leaders and administrators, as well as the teachers themselves, that will determine the success of the initiative. A summary of recommendations arising from the findings of the research is shown in Table 5.2, and the following section sets out a proposed plan of action for the development and implementation of the peer observation initiative.

Table 5.2 Summary of Recommendations

Stage	Recommendations	Sources of Data
Advance Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appoint specific teacher to champion or lead the initiative • Develop a vision/mission statement for the initiative • Disseminate information to staff • Address any skills gaps that may hinder success 	Focus groups and final interviews

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free up adequate time in teachers' schedules and arrange teaching coverage if necessary • Develop systematic process for ensuring all teachers have opportunities to observe and be observed • Develop processes to enable teachers to agree on focus area for observation if required 	
Content and Format of Peer Observation Protocol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of relatively unstructured format to allow flexibility in tailoring to PD needs • Basic data to be routinely collected on teacher names, grade/subject and teaching topic observed and date/time of observation • Inclusion of four broad observational items: what was observed?; What could be applied in own classroom?; Questions/comments/reflections; Follow-up date and proposed format. 	Focus groups
Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 10 to 20 minutes • One observation per 9 weeks (2 in total) • 1st teacher for observation to be assigned by admin, 2nd selected by observer 	Focus groups and final interviews
Post Observation Feedback Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow-up within 2 days by email or face-to-face 	Focus groups and final interviews
Documenting and Implementing Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on learning and apply methods/strategies as appropriate in own classroom • Reflect on experience of using new methods/strategies • Complete observation form, keep copy for own records and give one to administrator • Regular school-level review and evaluation of peer observation initiative 	

Proposed Implementation Plan for a Peer Observation Initiative

The ultimate purpose of this qualitative action research study has been to develop an implementation plan for a peer observation initiative and protocol in the school within which the research has taken place. This section draws on the findings that have been presented and discussed in Chapter 4 and above, to set out this proposed implementation plan. The use of action research methods, specifically the participation of teachers from this school in developing a draft peer observation protocol and identifying the factors perceived to be important when using peer observation as a form of professional development, is expected to help ensure that the proposed implementation plan will be readily accepted by the school community and will achieve its purpose of contributing to the effective professional development of teachers. This approach has ensured, for example, that the plan not only addresses the perceived personal development needs of teachers, but is also achievable in terms of time allocation, support from administrators and teacher buy-in. The proposed plan suggests that the use of peer observation in this school should continue to use Riel's (2007) iterative action research cycle of planning and preparation; action, and reflection, since peer observation for the purpose of professional development is a new initiative for this school and should therefore be continually reviewed and refined. Based on these headings, therefore, the following implementation plan is proposed for the school:

Phase 1: Planning and Preparation

- First, a specific individual (teacher leader or school administrator) should be given responsibility for planning and oversight of the peer observation initiative.

This individual should act as overall champion for the initiative and should disseminate information to teachers to raise awareness of its expected benefits for individual teachers, the school as a whole and its students. Having a champion will help ensure that the initiative does not lose momentum and that the resulting learning can be captured and effectively shared to promote professional development among the entire teacher community. The nominated (or volunteer) individual should already possess good knowledge and understanding of the use of peer observation for teacher professional development, or should be provided with the necessary training or mentoring in order to develop this.

- The nominated leader/champion should then collaborate with school leaders to develop a powerful vision and/or mission statement for the initiative, which is closely linked with the overall vision and mission of the school.
- Workshops or staff meetings should be held to disseminate information about the peer observation initiative, including the overall vision and mission. The meetings should also ensure that teachers understand their roles and responsibilities in relation to the initiative, how to conduct the observations, and what the expected benefits are for teachers, students and the school as a whole. This will be important in helping to overcome any skepticism or resistance to the initiative, especially among any teachers who have had negative experiences of peer observation in the past.
- Any skills gaps which might hinder the effectiveness of the peer observation initiative should be identified and addressed. For example, these might include

providing training or guidance to teachers on how to provide constructive feedback to their observed peers.

- Adequate time and, if necessary, classroom coverage arrangements, should be made available to allow teachers to participate effectively in all stages of the peer observation initiative, including planning, observations, feedback discussions and follow up work to incorporate any learning into their own teaching practices.
- A systematic process should be developed for the matching of teachers for peer observation. Individuals should be required or encouraged to observe at least two other teachers, once chosen by them based on interest in or perceived relevance of their teaching practices, and the other selected by the school administration with the purpose of ensuring that all teachers have an opportunity to be observed in the classroom and to receive peer feedback.
- Observations should be scheduled in advance to make most effective use of teacher time, for example to occur when the observed teacher is utilizing a specific type of practice of interest to the observer, or alternatively teaching a “focus area” on which they were seeking feedback. It is suggested that a shared online scheduling tool might usefully be developed to facilitate this.

Phase 2: Action (Observations)

- Each teacher should carry out at least two observations of different peers within the school year (each 9 weeks), with brief follow up discussions (face to face or by email) to be held between the observer and observed teachers within two days of the observation.

- Each classroom observation should last around 10 to 20 minutes, though with the permission of the observed teacher the observer should be allowed to remain in the classroom longer if they wish.
- The semi-structured peer observation template developed in the focus groups (Appendix F) should be completed during the observation or as soon as possible thereafter. In addition to basic information (see Chapter 4), this will include:
 - What was observed? (instructional strategies, student participation, technology use, etc.)
 - What was observed that you could use in your own classroom?
 - Questions, comments, reflections, and/or topics to discuss.
 - Follow-up date and type (email, face-to-face, etc.)
- Additional pages might be included if teachers wish to make more extensive notes on their experience of the observation and what they learned from it, or for the purpose of providing constructive feedback to the observed teacher.

Phase 3: Reflection

Finally, it is important that not only individual teachers but the school leadership and the teacher community as a whole reflect on and learn from the ongoing peer observation initiative, and regularly review and improve the methods in order to ensure maximum positive outcomes. In order to do so, it will be important to:

- Ensure that all peer observations are properly documented and copied to a central administrative system.

- Regularly review the outcomes of peer observations in terms of reported learning and professional development for the teachers involved, as well as any challenges encountered.
- Periodically analyze the documented information to identify practices or methods found to be particularly helpful in contributing to the professional development of teachers, and share these with the wider teacher community (e.g. via workshops, newsletters or staff meetings).
- At the conclusion of the school year, review and utilize the documented teacher observations about the benefits and challenges of peer observation to determine whether to continue with the initiative and to identify ways in which this might be improved.
- Begin the cycle of planning and preparation again for the following school year.

Discussion

The nature of action research is that it is focused on a problem of practice within a specific organizational setting, and used to develop a solution or intervention tailored to the needs of this setting and its organizational members. By adopting this method, and using a phenomenological approach to generating in-depth insights into the views and experiences of a sample of teachers from a middle school in South Carolina, this study has successfully developed evidence-based recommendations and a proposed implementation plan for the development of a peer observation initiative and protocol that are likely to be both acceptable to and beneficial for teachers and school leaders in this setting. Clear and actionable recommendations and a plan of action have been set out in the preceding sections for the overall design and implementation of the initiative.

Overall, the study findings have confirmed that, at least among the sample of teachers in this research setting, peer observation is seen as an effective form of professional development for teachers which can be beneficial to both the observer and the observed teacher. The participants stressed, however, that this is only likely to be the case if peer observation is implemented in the right way. In particular, it should be seen as a professional development tool and not as a teacher evaluation method, and adequate time should be made available for participation in the observations and follow up work, so that it does not become just another burden on the already overloaded schedules of most teachers. In these ways, peer observation is likely to contribute, as indicated in the literature (Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2015 Mangin, 2016), to the development of a strong learning community among teachers, which is ultimately likely to improve teaching practices and result in better student learning outcomes.

The research used adult learning theory (Lindeman, 1926; Knowles, 1980; MacKeracher, 2004) as its theoretical framework. This assumes that adults learn most effectively from real-world activities seen to have direct relevance to their everyday lives, and that they interpret and apply this learning within the context of their existing understanding of the world. The findings of the study were aligned with and provide support for the use of adult learning theory in understanding the role and benefits of peer observation for teachers. For example, the participants stressed the importance of peer observation being closely tailored to their personal development needs, and delivering immediate learning that could be readily applied in their own classroom situations. The findings demonstrate the value of using adult learning theory as a theoretical framework for future research in this area.

The main limitation of this study, which is an inherent feature of many action research projects, is that the findings and recommendations are only directly relevant to the research setting, in this case a middle school in South Carolina. This should not be regarded as a weakness, however, since qualitative action research methods were adopted specifically for the purpose of developing a peer observation initiative and protocol tailored to the needs of this school and its teachers. This does not mean that the study and its findings have no relevance beyond the immediate research setting. Similar schools may also benefit from implementing the recommendations, since it is likely that many of the experiences and views reported by the sample of teachers in the present study will be common to other middle school teachers. More generally, the study provides a model action research design and data collection instruments that might be adapted for use by other schools for the purpose of developing a similar peer observation initiative and protocol more specifically tailored to their specific needs. The study also contributes to the wider educational literature by demonstrating the effectiveness of this methodological approach for conducting research into peer observation as teacher professional development in the middle school setting, and by highlighting the relevance of adult learning theory to this area of research.

Conclusion

This phenomenological, action research study used focus groups and interviews with a sample of teachers from a large middle school in northern South Carolina. It has demonstrated the effectiveness of this methodological approach in generating valuable data for use in generating recommendations for the development of a peer observation initiative and protocol for this school. The main benefits of using action research methods

and a phenomenological approach to address the research questions of this study are that the findings and recommendations are firmly grounded in the personal experiences and views of the research participants and closely tailored to the specific school environment which forms the research setting. This makes it more likely that the recommendations will be acceptable to and implemented by the school leadership, that the peer observation initiative will be readily accepted by the wider population of teachers in this school environment, and that it will contribute to improved outcomes in terms of teacher professional development and ultimately student achievement.

It is hoped that the recommendations of the study will be adopted by the school in which the research has been conducted. Like most other public schools in the U.S., and as reflected in the study findings, this school and its teachers face severe constraints on time and resources which are likely to present the greatest risk to the successful implementation of a peer observation initiative, even though this is a relatively low-cost form of professional development for teachers. The recommendations set out in this chapter are intended to help ensure that the initiative can be implemented in ways that make most efficient use of time and resources, while also ensuring that the initiative can successfully deliver the desired outcomes in terms of the professional development of teachers. To achieve this, however, will require a sustained commitment on the part of teachers as well as school leaders to support and engage effectively in the initiative. The findings of the study provide a robust evidence base on which to build this support and commitment, and contribute to the development of a firmer foundation for the use of peer observation as a potentially effective form of teacher professional development which

can ultimately be used to enhance teaching and improve student outcomes in schools across the country.

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APPENDIX A

PRELIMINARY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How many years have you been teaching?
2. What is your current teaching assignment?
3. What is your philosophy of teaching?
4. What does optimal professional development look like to you?
5. Have you participated in any kind of peer observation process before? If so, what was the process?
6. What concerns do you have about the process of peer observations?
7. Have you ever been evaluated through an observation? What did you gain from that process?
8. What do you hope to gain from this experience?
9. What support will you need during the process?
10. Do you think peer observations will be supported school wide? If so, how? If not, why not?

APPENDIX B

POST/FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the purpose of peer observations for teachers?
2. What did you learn about teaching and your own practice by observing your peers?
3. Did the peer observations cause you to experiment or change your current teaching practices? Explain.
4. What aspects of the peer observations contributed the most to your professional development?
5. Which steps in the process were most valuable?
6. Referring to the peer observation form, which factors are the most important when completing peer observations?
7. What are the benefits of peer observations?
8. What are the challenges of peer observations?
9. What suggestions do you have that would improve the peer observation process to make it more beneficial to teachers?
10. Would you recommend peer observations as a form of professional development? Why or why not?

APPENDIX C

ACTION RESEARCH TIMELINE

Date	Action
Aug. 14	Preliminary interviews
Aug. 15	First focus group meeting
Aug. 28 – Sept. 1	First round of observations
Sept. 5	Second focus group meeting
Sept. 18 – Sept. 29	Second round of observations
Oct. 17	Third focus group meeting
Nov. 7	Fourth focus group meeting
Jan. 23	Post interviews

APPENDIX D
OBSERVATION FORM 1

Observer: _____ Teacher Observed:

Grade/Subject: _____ Date/Time: _____

Area of
Focus: _____

Learning Intention(s):

What instructional practice(s) is/are the teacher using? (Lecture, video, lab/hands-on, student presentations, stations/learning centers, giving directions, etc.)

What are students doing? (listening, speaking, reading, writing, etc.)

What is the level of student engagement in the room? Provide evidence.

Make note of important elements of classroom environment (Materials available for student use, routines/procedures in place, student work displayed, desk set-up):

What technology is being used in the classroom? How?

Based on the area of focus of the observation, what was observed?

What have you observed that you could use in your own classroom?

Questions, comments, reflections, or suggestions

APPENDIX E

PEER OBSERVATION CRITERIA 1

- Speak to the teacher in advance to allow the teacher to define a focus area possibly related to something he/she would like to have feedback or suggestions on related to strategies, classroom management, etc.
- Save the Google Doc to your Docs so everyone doesn't have access to your docs.
- Conduct a semi-unannounced walkthrough observation (the teacher will know the week, but not necessarily the day).
- The walkthrough observation should be 5-10 minutes depending on what information needs to be gathered.
- Have a 5-10 minute follow-up conversation within 2 days of the observation. After the follow-up conversation, send a copy of the written observation form to the teacher that was observed.

APPENDIX F
PEER OBSERVATION FORM - FINAL

Observer: _____ Teacher Observed: _____

Grade/Subject: _____ Date/Time: _____

Teaching Topic:

What was observed? (instructional strategies, student participation, technology use, etc.)

What was observed that you could use in your own classroom?

Questions, comments, reflections, and/or topics to discuss.

Follow-up date and type (email, face-to-face, etc.):

APPENDIX G

PEER OBSERVATION CRITERIA 2

- Save the Google Doc to your Docs so everyone does not have access to your docs.
- The observation should be 10-20 minutes depending on what information needs to be gathered.
- The first observation is assigned. The second observation is your choice (use only teachers on the Focus Team).
- Follow-up with the teacher within 2 days of the observation. Follow-up can be an email or conversation depending on the need.
- File the written observation form in your records.

APPENDIX H

PEER OBSERVATION CRITERIA - FINAL

- Save the Google Doc to your Docs.
- The observation should last 10-20 minutes.
- Complete 1 observation per nine weeks. The first observation during the 3rd nine weeks will be assigned by administration. The second observation during the 4th nine weeks is a teacher of your choice.
- Follow-up with the observed teacher within 2 days of the observation. Follow-up can be an email or conversation depending on the need.
- Reflect on the observation and what you learned. Apply strategies to your own classroom.
- Give a copy of your completed observation form to your administrator and file the written observation form in your records.