

A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF EARLY
CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IMPLEMENTING ACTION RESEARCH AS A
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT METHOD

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the EDUC 990 Course

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this systematic grounded theory study was to gain insight through the experiences of early childhood educators and their perceptions as they implemented action research as a professional development method. This study focused on the process of implementing action research as a professional development method and strived to answer questions related to the possible future use of this model in other educational settings while describing educator experiences, perceptions and beliefs. The central research question was: (a) How does the process of utilizing action research influence the professional development of early childhood educators as it relates to their professional practices? Other questions that were answered are the following: (b) How do educators perceive action research prior to implementing in an early childhood environment? (c) How do educators perceive collaboration during the process of implementing action research in an early childhood environment? (d) What is the perceived value, by the participants, of implementing action research as a professional development method? Data collection included interviews, observations, and journals. Detailed procedures for analysis were employed during the study with three phases of coding: Open, Axial, and Selective (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). Data was analyzed by describing the experiences of the educators in detail and the themes that emerged during the collection of data to form a grounded theory model on utilizing action research as a professional development method in early childhood settings.

Descriptors: Professional Development, Educator Perceptions, Action Research

Dedication

I dedicate this work back to my Lord and Savior. He put a desire in my heart to pursue this degree and I could not have made it through each of the trials I faced during this journey without His strength.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation was completed through the efforts of many people. I first would like to thank my family for allowing me to consume the last seven years of our lives to pursue this degree. My husband has been a constant support and by him taking on more responsibilities at home, I was able to focus my attention on coursework and this dissertation.

My children have also been gracious through the years. This process took me away from them at times and I appreciate them understanding when I needed to work rather than spending time with them. My youngest daughter was eight years old and my oldest daughter was eleven years old when I began this process. They are now my beautiful fifteen and eighteen year olds. I hope they learned through my example to persevere and to never give up on a goal even when it seems impossible.

I would also like to thank my mother. Through her example of pursuing her Master's Degree as a working, single parent, I was motivated to continually better myself through education. Her support was invaluable and she was always my biggest cheerleader. My family, as a whole, deserves most of the praise for their unwavering support.

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committee members and the time they spent from their own families to help me achieve this dream. Much appreciation is also extended to the research consultant, Dr. Lucinda Spaulding. She was an invaluable guide for us all through the process. Her dedication to rigor has made this a better study. Each of these contributions from the committee and research consultant are greatly appreciated. I have valued their expertise and extend my sincerest gratitude.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Professional development is a crucial part of improving teaching practices and maintaining high quality in the profession. Quality training coupled with collaboration can inaugurate change in an organization to initiate a continual search for more effective methods (Meister, 2010). However, professional development has typically been administered without much follow-up and connection to the learning environment (Guskey, 2003; Guskey & Kwang Suk, 2009). Research in this area has primarily focused on the benefits of professional development; different models used for professional development and barriers to effective professional development practices (Malm, 2009). Research rarely goes beyond the surface to include rigorous investigations of what makes the professional development appealing or not appealing to participants and how practices can be improved for lasting results. There is a need to identify approaches best suited for continual growth and development among educators to maintain quality. However, as a step toward that idea, a closer look at the participants' perceptions about professional development is needed to begin to understand how to effectively plan and create professional development models that are appropriate and appealing to the participants. In addition, identifying a clear definition and description of what is considered appropriate and appealing professional development needs to be clarified.

Action research is a model that has been utilized in school-age environments as a professional development process (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012). According to Mills (2011), action research is a collaborative process that allows educators to be active

participants in the direction of their own professional development. However, the primary focus of research in the area of action research has been on the steps in implementation rather than on the actual process of the altered professional disposition of the educators (Mills, 2011; Vogrinc & Valenčič Zulijan, 2009). In addition, the majority of the research in the area of action research has been focused in the area of school-age environments with little emphasis on early childhood environments (Diana, 2011; Razfar, 2011; West, 2011). Research supports the need for professional development (Meister, 2010); the success of action research (Razfar, 2011); and the benefits of educators engaging in a collaborative and reflective process (Seamon, 2008). Allowing time to reflect on a process can lead educators to new levels of understanding and a change in disposition (Ivers, 2012). All of these elements can be brought together as a focus of inquiry to explore professional development in the early childhood environment to lead to a greater understanding of the process.

Background

Appropriate Professional Development

The criteria utilized in determining the appropriateness of professional development is often inconsistent and at times contradictory. Much of the professional development for educators is not designed with their needs as the primary focus (Croft, Cogshall, Dolan, & Powers, 2010). In addition, most research utilized by policy makers to make decisions about professional development topics are not based on credible evidence of what has been proven to work in the classroom (Guskey & Kwang Suk, 2009). There is typically minimal evaluation or implementation of the professional

development training, which is contrary to what researchers say should happen once educators are back in their classroom settings (Brown & Inglis, 2013). Many times the evaluation of professional development opportunities is not a priority, which leaves the outcome of training and strategies in question. Williams (2009) identified appropriate professional development as resulting in application of learning and “effective outcomes for the participant involved in the learning process” (p.5). Guskey (2003) noted that the success of professional development activities is often defined by the participants, so in this study the definition of what is considered appropriate will emerge during the process. Guskey and Kwang Suk (2009) also suggests that implementation of any professional development activity be on a small-scale initially. Examining professional development options with a smaller group leads to a greater understanding of the process prior to investing an enormous amount of time and energy in a new strategy (Guskey & Kwang Suk, 2009). This was the basis for the research. The intent was to observe a small group of participants in their environment to gain insight into the process and their perceptions of particular professional development strategies for future planning.

Possible strategies explored. In the search for appropriate models of professional development, particular themes emerged in the literature as being considered an appropriate approach. Collaboration among colleagues; opportunities for ongoing application; and active participation in the process were prevalent themes identified by participants (Guskey & Kwang Suk, 2009).

Collaboration among colleagues. Collaborative settings have been identified in research as an effective strategy for implementing professional development (O’Mara &

Gutierrez, 2010). Therefore, a collaborative professional development model needs to be identified to ensure positive outcomes. A collaborative model will also more likely ensure the approaches continue in the environment and lead to a higher level of learning in the future (O'Mara & Gutierrez, 2010). Collaboration among colleagues leads to a higher level of understanding through discussion and exchange of ideas. According to Meister (2010), learning environments that foster collaborative settings produce higher outcomes for students and more satisfaction from educators. However, educators have been underestimated as contributors to their own professional development (Berry, Norton & Byrd, 2007). Solutions to issues that directly affect their classroom are often provided by third party decision makers with limited context to the real issues.

Professional learning communities. Collaboration among colleagues leading to the creation of professional learning communities has the potential as a transformative concept in the area of professional development (Berry et al., 2007). However, according to Berry et al. (2007), the gap in research related to professional learning communities is gaining an understanding of the best way to approach the development of professional learning communities so they are beneficial and sustainable. In the process of evoking change in professional development methods, problems are predicted to emerge as educators begin to take control of their own learning. The nature of the teaching position has traditionally been in a subordinate role to a principal or administrator. Berry et al. (2007) suggest careful formation of professional learning communities to identify how the group will function without higher level leadership and how ideas will be disseminated. According to DuFour and Mattos (2010), higher level leadership can be

crucial to supporting and initiating professional learning communities. However, they apprise that once they are organized, they should not be micromanaged. With an emphasis on “research-based school improvement models” (DuFour & Mattos, 2010, p.34), a collaborative model that encourages shared teaching practices and a collective responsibility to improve student learning culminates a solution. Through the observation phase of the study, the collaborative efforts of the early childhood educators were a focus to gain greater insight in their experience during this process.

Opportunities for ongoing application. Potential problems with dissemination may be minimized by developing pride and a strong sense of accomplishment in the ongoing professional development communities and in the professional development model (Berry et al., 2007). Guskey and Kwang Suk (2009) suggests that educators find professional development meaningful when they are able to readily apply the new knowledge and see results, which leads to a sense of accomplishment and control. This process of application leads to additional changes in practice for a more meaningful approach to professional development (Guskey & Kwang Suk, 2009). According to Meister (2010), there is an “implementation dip” when it comes to following through after professional development training (p. 894). If the information gained during training is not applied in the learning setting then the likelihood of sustaining an ongoing professional development program is minimal and the effectiveness is void. However, if educators are able to apply the new knowledge and see changes in their environment, then they are more likely to engage in future opportunities due to a change in the perception and meaningfulness (Guskey & Kwang Suk, 2009).

Metacognition. A higher level of thought about the process known as metacognition can lead to more engagement in the professional development process and to the application of the new knowledge (Martinez, 2006). The gap in the research was the absence of how to move educators toward higher levels of metacognition. The focus was on the importance to apply the knowledge, but it is just as important to think through the process before making application. According to Martinez (2006), it is likely that not much thought moves into an automated sequence. For example, individuals can drive a vehicle to a familiar location without much thought due to the automated pattern and repetitiveness of the route. This automated thought pattern is also likely connected to the traditional process of professional development. Metacognition, as an alternative thought pattern, is a necessary component to move the participants in professional development to higher levels of thought and application (Ivers, 2012). The higher level of thought about the process will most likely lead to higher levels of pride and sense of accomplishment. Ivers (2012) asserts that higher levels of critical thinking will occur among educators when they have the opportunity to reflect on practices and explore areas where they still have questions. This “thinking about thinking” strategy, or metacognition, leads educators to reflect on their current understandings and create new levels of understanding through personal and group reflection (Ivers, 2012, p. 51).

Active participation. Even though application of learning was a prevalent theme in the research literature related to appropriate professional development, active participation was also a recurring theme in the literature related to the positive transformation of adult learning. In a search for a way to improve professional

development, active participation emerged as a method for engaging educators collaboratively to effectively change their teaching practices (Grossman & Arnold, 2011). According to Grossman and Arnold (2011), collaboration allows for active participation in the process of professional development, but only collaborating during the process does not constitute ongoing participation. Grossman and Arnold (2011) highlight the potential of a more active approach utilizing technology, but offers little about implementation. Other research identified educators as taking a more active role in learning as a potential professional development method with the focus on the educator's level of experience (Vogrinc & Valenčič Zuljan, 2009). The gap in research was identified in their study as a need to investigate ways to emphasize a constructivist approach to acquiring knowledge and motivating educators to become active participants in their own knowledge construction (Vogrinc & Valenčič Zuljan, 2009). There is an identified need in research to understand the thoughts, beliefs, assumptions and experiences of the educators as they implement a more active participation model to understand how to most effectively introduce this method as a sustainable professional development option. Constructivism has been identified as an active participation model.

Constructivism

According to Perkins (1999), “constructivism generally casts learners in an active role” and “often emphasizes that knowledge and understanding are highly social” (p. 7). A constructivist approach embraces the philosophy of learning as an active method of acquiring knowledge rather than a passive method (Piaget, 1952). The active part of learning originates with the learner (Ültanir, 2012). The knowledge gained by the learner

is connected to the depth in which they actively explore the topic. The emphasis of instruction is active and collaborative with the educator role being more of a facilitator and the learner constructing their knowledge as they explore the topic from their own perspective (Ültanir, 2012).

Constructivism lends itself to a learning environment that supports collaboration and discovery. Bruner (1960) promoted learning as an active process where participants were encouraged to create meaning from experiences and information. In this study, participants were engaging in an active exploration of the topic. Ruey (2010) advocates for the constructivist approach due to its collaborative, interactive style over the more passive learning environment. When approaching adult learners, they need reminders and assistance to become independent thinkers, rather than just receivers of knowledge (Ruey, 2010). Some of their past experiences in school may have been in more of a passive delivery method. However, adult learners need to be actively involved in the process of learning to retain the information (Ruey, 2010). The adult learners in this study were educators and they benefited from the active and collaborative format provided by the constructivist approach. Therefore, constructivism for the purposes of this study is defined as a learning approach where participants learn through experiences and interactions with others while enabling them to learn new concepts to be utilized in future actions (Reich, 2007). The concepts were formed through perceptions of experiences and then categorized for understanding (Bruner, 1960).

Constructivism has been interpreted in a variety of ways. According to Reich (2007), several theorists are connected to constructivist ideas with each approach having

a different understanding and origin. However, for the purposes of this study, Piaget's initial constructive psychology (Piaget, 1952); Vygotsky's social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978); and the interactive constructivism of Dewey (1966) contributed to the definition of constructivism utilized in this research with the understanding that other forms of constructivism do exist. The ideas of these theorists can be summarized briefly under the following descriptors: Learning by doing; Context; and Interactions (Reich, 2007).

Learning by doing. Learning takes place in the process of taking action. Through the process of learning by doing, growth occurs during the experience. Learners are able to manipulate objects and apply concepts during the process, which leads to the construction of new knowledge (Reich, 2007). Through hands-on experiences, the learner is able to comprehend more complex concepts. Constructivism provides learners the opportunity to practice metacognitive skills, while recalling prior knowledge (Denton, 2012). Constructivism is based on the earlier work of Piaget (1952), which supports the construction of new ideas and further cognitive development by providing conditions for learners to actively engage in learning through hands-on experience.

Context. Learning takes place within an environment and through interactions with other participants. Learners discover new concepts through inquiry and discovery. As they interact with other participants in a specific learning environment, each learner has a unique learning experience based on their perception and interactions (Reich, 2007). Through group dialogue, participants are able to construct new knowledge and make sense of abstract concepts (Denton, 2012.) This area of constructivism is based on

how Vygotsky (1978) further developed the work of Piaget (1952) by focusing on the social aspect of learning through hands-on experiences with other learners.

Interactions. Learning takes place within an environment that is supportive and nurturing. With constructivism, knowledge is created collaboratively through interactions with others (Denton, 2012). Authentic and meaningful interactions lead to learners being more open to collaboration and the exchange of ideas. Through these supportive and collaborative interactions, learners are able to explore concepts freely without the fear of failure or ridicule (Reich, 2007). The interactive element of constructivism is supported by the earlier work of Dewey (1966) as he criticized traditional education practices as being too passive. He advocated for an interactive process that allowed learners to take a more social active role in their learning to lead to more meaningful connections.

Exploration of alternate approaches. Behaviorism and cognitivism were explored to determine if they would be a viable approach to integrate in the research model. Each approach has a unique way of approaching learning. Although other learning theories were explored, constructivism was best suited for the current research model. Behaviorism was found to be most effective in learning situations where the individual needs to respond to a situation in the same way each time (Nagowah & Nagowah, 2009). Behaviorist instructional practices reward progress toward set goals and punish regression from those goals in the form of incentives or grades (Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008). For that reason, behaviorism was eliminated from consideration. Cognitivism was also explored and although this theory employs an active approach, individuals still learn a skill in a particular way limiting the personal perspective

(Nagowah & Nagowah, 2009). Cognitivists help students understand how to process information, but limit student input (Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008). Therefore, this approach was eliminated as well.

Action Research

In the process of attempting to identify appropriate professional development models through research, one approach surfaced which would involve educators as active participants in their own development. Action research was first described as a reflective process for solving a problem in an environment (Lewin, 1946). A significant amount of research has been conducted on the benefits of action research (Razfar, 2011). Research in the areas of professional development and action research are also abundant; however, the process of bringing the two areas together to create a seamless professional development strategy represents a gap in the research (Mills, 2011).

There is also no significant research aligning professional development, action research and the early childhood environment. This research was nearly non-existent due to more of a focus being placed on secondary educational environments (Mills, 2011). After a thorough search utilizing Liberty's online library and visiting the local library in Rowan County for hardcopy primary sources, the research located was primarily focused on school-age environments. The database for education research, Academic Complete, was utilized for the majority of the research based on its alignment with the field of education. Topics used in the search process related to professional development were "education and professional development"; "early childhood and professional development"; "education and training"; "professional development and preschool" and

“professional development and teachers”. Topics used in the search process related to action research were “action research and education”; “action research and early childhood”; “action research and learning”; “action research and school”; “action research and professional development” and “action research and preschool”.

Action research has been utilized in secondary educational settings for many years, but has not been embraced by the early childhood community as a viable professional development approach. This is a gap in research and the basis of this grounded theory study, which was to examine the role action research plays in the process of professional development for early childhood educators.

Action research has been identified as a collaborative method to answer questions about a perceived problem or issue in the learning environment (Mills, 2011). The research is designed and conducted by educators who want to improve practices (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012). When the research is conducted as a team of educators, the process is identified as collaborative action research (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012). Action research allows educators to be active participants in their own professional development while making significant changes to the learning environment. Through inquiry and investigation, information is analyzed and then changes are implemented in the environment (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012). Through this application of knowledge, professional practices are improved and the community of educators benefit from the information. According to Kapachtsi and Kakana (2012), action research can change the whole social system in an educational environment so continued learning is desired. According to Mills (2011), practical research enables educators to take more control of

their learning environments by providing solutions and empowerment to make a difference in their own classroom. However, the emphasis is not only on the change taking place in the classroom, but the altered professional disposition of the teachers is an important benefit (Mills, 2011).

There was a variety of research conducted aligning action research and the secondary school environment, however that research was focused more on describing the process and steps rather than reflecting on teacher perception or suggestions for making it more relevant (Vogrinc & Valenčič Zuljan, 2009). This represents a gap in research and would be one of the primary focuses of this grounded theory study. By taking into consideration the experiences and perceptions of the educators as they relate to applying action research, the metacognitive process can be analyzed to provide a more significant basis for planning future collaborative professional development models.

Situation to Self

This study is important to any field that engages in ongoing professional development to maintain quality. The topic of professional development is personally interesting to me as a researcher due to the nature of my past and present positions in the education field. I have worked at every level in education including preschool, elementary, middle and high school and I have been in administrative positions at the preschool and elementary level. I also have worked in higher education in training teachers pursuing degrees in the area of Early Childhood Education at the community college level and pursuing Birth-Kindergarten Teacher Licensure at private four-year colleges and universities. In these positions, I have personally observed a lack of

consistency in professional development approaches and the continual waste of time and resources. These observations have led to an interest in how educators perceive the professional development opportunities and the themes that might emerge when observing the professional development process in action. A specific interest is in early childhood educators since this is my primary field and little research has been conducted in the area of utilizing action research as a professional development model and identifying educator perceptions about the process.

Epistemological Approach

The philosophical assumption utilized in this qualitative study is the epistemological approach (Gardner, Fedoruk, & McCutcheon, 2012). The nature of this philosophy enables the researcher to be submerged in the field to conduct research in the context of the participant's world (Creswell, 2007). As a professor of higher education, a significant amount of time is spent in the field observing teaching practices. This philosophical approach was a natural connection to my current observation role and my presence in the environment did not cause additional distractions due to teachers seeing me as familiar. However, I was not supervising any of the teachers in the sites chosen for this study.

Interpretivist Framework

The paradigm and framework that guides the research and compliments the philosophical assumption in this qualitative study is an interpretivist approach. The interpretivist paradigm lends itself to a socially constructed and emergent theory (Glesne, 2011). By gaining the perspective of the participants through observations, interviews,

journals and interactions the researcher can interpret patterns. The interpretivist paradigm was the basis for the qualitative research in this study and allowed for emphasis on a socially constructed research approach.

In this paradigm, data collection does not support a hypothesis. Rather, data are collected to assist in the development of a new theory that emerges during the epistemological research approach (Glesne, 2011). This grounded theory study utilized the interpretivist framework with an epistemological philosophical approach to seek to understand the professional development environment from the perspective of the participant. According to Weber (1964), seeking to understand a process leads to more applicable information rather than simply explaining facts. An additional term sometimes used to describe the interpretivist view is constructivism (Glesne, 2011).

Interpretivism defined. The interpretivist approach for the purposes of this study were defined as a research approach that may result in a theory while searching for patterns and themes in an environment where the researcher is personally involved through submersion in the environment. This approach is based on the earlier work of Max Weber (1964), where he promoted the idea of understanding a process rather than just explaining facts. This combination of interpretivist and constructivist approaches is more accurately aligned with the research focus of describing a more active type of professional development. Qualitative research, within an interpretivist and constructivist framework, allows the researcher to better understand professional development and action research at a deeper level and the individuals it most affects (Glesne, 2011).

Problem Statement

With little emphasis on follow-up and the individualization of professional development, training dollars will be continually wasted and meaningful changes in professional practice will go unaffected (Guskey, 2003; Guskey & Kwang Suk, 2009). Professional development methods need to create meaningful change in the learning environments and the educators themselves in order to be considered appropriate (Malm, 2009). Continuing to focus on the need for professional development in the absence of understanding what makes specific methods appealing is futile (Meister, 2010). More research in the area of understanding perceptions of educators is needed to make the best choices in types of professional development to employ (Meister, 2010). In addition, a closer look at the early childhood setting specifically is needed since there is a lack in research related to early childhood environments and the implementation of action research as a professional development process at this level (Brown & Inglis, 2013).

There is a need to examine the thoughts, beliefs, assumptions and understandings of the early childhood educators as they implement action research to understand the process for future decisions about sustainable professional development methods (Mills, 2011). The focus of this systematic grounded theory study was to collect data from participants in order to gain their perception of implementing action research in their learning environment.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this systematic grounded theory study was to gain insights through the experiences of early childhood educators as they implemented action research as a

professional development method. The focus of this research was to observe the process of implementing action research and the perceptions of early childhood educators while transitioning traditional professional development methods from an anecdotal model to more of an application model (Easton, 2008).

At the beginning stages of the research, action research was defined as a collaborative process of practical inquiry in the learning environment to enhance knowledge and transform practices (West, 2011). The concept of professional development for the purposes of this study was defined as the process of acquiring knowledge and skills necessary to promote a positive change in teacher behavior leading to the application of knowledge (Easton, 2008).

The final objective of this systematic grounded theory study was to explain the process in which early childhood educators implement action research in the learning environment and how that process relates to their professional practices. The educator's perceptions of action research as a professional development method; the collaborative process during implementation; and the value derived from the experience was a focus of inquiry.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was to focus on collecting data in the early childhood environment to create a higher level of understanding of the implementation of action research as a collaborative professional development method (West, 2011). This research will assist individuals who plan professional development activities for educators in developing more meaningful training based on the experiences and

perceptions of those directly impacted (Malm, 2009). By having a better understanding of the perspectives of educators, those planning professional development will have the knowledge to plan more effectively by implementing suggestions based on this study (Meister, 2010).

Contribution to Research

This grounded theory study contributes to the current research in the areas of professional development and action research to generate a model to explain how action research serves as a professional development method for early childhood educators (Vongrinc & Valenčič Zulijan, 2009; West, 2011). The study also compliments research in the area of professional learning communities as collaboration was one of the areas of focus during implementation. Professional learning communities are beginning to become a part of early childhood environments, but have not yet been analyzed for their benefit to the professional development process at the early childhood level (Swartz & Triscari, 2011). By introducing a more collaborative approach to professional development, it can lead to higher levels of participation and sharing of ideas; higher levels of confidence and sense of empowerment related to research; and better implementation of professional development funds (Hmelo-Silver, Chernobilsky, & Jordan, 2008). By utilizing action research, the nature of this approach allows for job-embedded professional development, which can be documented more frequently and more effectively to promote the positive changes in the learning environment (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012). This research represents insight into a new professional development approach that the participants in the study had not experienced before in a professional

setting. Through the analysis of the experiences and perceptions, themes were identified to bring a clearer understanding of how action research might be utilized in a learning environment and what current perceptions were presented by the participants. In the process, other questions were answered concerning educators' preconceived ideas about action research and the value placed on continuing action research as a viable means of professional development.

Relevance to the Field

The study is relevant to the field of education and other fields that utilize professional development to remain current. The empirical, theoretical and practical relevance all contribute to how action research can be utilized in the early childhood environment and how the study of educator perceptions and experiences can contribute to future planning of professional development models.

Empirical relevance. The process of engaging in action research is similar to conducting an experiment, which is an empirical process. A portion of the data was collected through observation while in the learning environment and other portions of the data were collected while experimenting with application. The research questions were created to contribute to the research base in education as it relates specifically to the early childhood environment. The intent was to create original data while answering a question in research (Mayer, 2008). A connection between positive experiences and teachers working together as collaborative professionals while implementing action research was anticipated based on previous research.

Theoretical relevance. A new theory or understanding was anticipated to emerge during the empirical process based on the experiences of the participants in the study as they collaborated with other professionals while implementing action research in their classrooms. There was not a theory available that provided understanding of how action research can best be utilized in an early childhood environment. The intent of this study was to advance the field of education by contributing to educational theory as it relates to early childhood environments (Mayer, 2008). The study focused on action research as a professional development method and the perceptions of the participants will guide future research in the area.

Practical relevance. Creating practical relevance through the study will allow the information to be utilized in a variety of ways in different settings (Mayer, 2008). The use of action research as a professional development method will enable other fields to utilize this type of research in their own settings, making the research practical and beneficial across disciplines. Identifying issues that may occur in the learning environment can provide a basis for future study and emerging perceptions can guide varying strategies for implementation.

Research Questions

The study attempted to answer several questions related to the role action research plays in the professional development process. The central question, which is the guide for the research, is as follows: How does the process of utilizing action research influence the professional development of early childhood educators as it relates to their professional practices? The study focused on determining the role action research played

in the process of professional development in the learning environment of the participants. This was important to identify since research is limited in the area of implementing action research in an early childhood setting. Additional questions focused on describing the preconceptions about action research; the experiences and perceptions of the early childhood educators as they implement action research as a professional development method; and the value derived from participating in this type of professional development. This information was important to collect for future studies to identify the most relevant strategies for professional development training. The questions were as follows:

1. Central Question: How does the process of utilizing action research influence the professional development of early childhood educators as it relates to their professional practices?
2. Sub-Question: How do educators perceive action research prior to implementing in an early childhood environment?
3. Sub-Question: How do educators perceive collaboration during the process of implementing action research in an early childhood environment?
4. Sub-Question: What is the perceived value, by participants, of implementing action research as a professional development method?

Delimitations

In qualitative research, delimitations are the boundaries set by the researcher when conducting research (Creswell, 2007). These boundaries are in the control of the

researcher and are administered to focus on a particular environment with specific participants.

Teacher Participants

In an effort to define the scope and focus of the study, the lead teachers in the learning environment were the primary focus of the exploration. This limited the number of participants to a number that was more conducive to qualitative data collection and ensured that the primary focus was on participants directly responsible for classroom implementation. The smaller sample size promoted more collaboration among the participants during focus group interviews and allowed more focused data collection through observations of experiences (Swartz & Triscari, 2011). Teachers were chosen that were already in a high quality learning environment and had a base level of education. The teachers had a two-year degree in Early Childhood or had significant coursework toward obtaining their degree in this area. The level of degree was important because it indicated the teachers would have a base knowledge of child development and curriculum planning, which created an optimal environment to introduce a new concept. Public school teachers were purposely excluded due to the possibility of having prior knowledge and exposure to action research in their degree programs or schools. This study was targeting the emerging perceptions of early childhood teachers about implementing action research in their environment.

Environment

The study took place in two early childhood environments. Early childhood settings were the focus due to the noticeable absence of action research in these settings.

School-age settings were excluded from the study due to the possibility of teacher implementation of action research in the environment previously, which would have altered teachers' emerging perceptions.

Child care environment descriptions. The specific child care environments included in the study were similar and rated at the highest level according to the Division of Child Development. These environments are a representation of quality child care across two counties, Rowan and Cabarrus in North Carolina. Each environment possessed a five star rating and was accredited by The National Association for the Education of Young Children.

The environments were meeting enhanced standards by implementing a developmentally appropriate curriculum and meeting lower teacher-child ratios. The Division of Child Development visits each environment at least one time a year to evaluate the program components. Evaluated program components include compliance with health and sanitation regulations; compliance with space guidelines and ratios; compliance with curriculum standards; compliance with supervision and safety guidelines; compliance with keeping updated records for children and staff; and compliance with medicine administration.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) visits each environment every five years with annual reporting requirements. NAEYC evaluates each program for quality including nurturing interactions; meaningful family involvement; professional development of staff; and developmentally appropriate assessment. The curriculum utilized in both settings is Creative Curriculum, which has

been identified by the Division of Child Development and the Department of Public Instruction as an appropriate curriculum for early childhood settings. The demographics of the children served in each of the classrooms were similar between the two counties. Both settings provide care for children with exceptionalities and partner with the Department of Social Services to provide supplements to families with low income. The teacher-child ratios in both settings were at the highest standard possible according to suggested ratios identified by The National Association for the Education of Young Children. These standards surpass the standards of the Division of Child Development and the Department of Public Instruction.

The two environments were closely aligned in their quality of staff and high commitment to education, which made any variations in the data more evident. The experiences of the participants in these environments provided a starting point for future studies in other environments at varying levels.

Research Plan

Qualitative Research

As previously mentioned, the method of study was a qualitative approach. Professional development is a topic that lends itself to a qualitative design due to the personal nature of the topic and the ability to explore related issues in the learning environment at a deeper level. Qualitative research allowed a full exploration of professional development needs and predispositions of the subjects.

Qualitative data collection. When interpreting qualitative data, the researcher enters the participants' world and establishes rapport (Andrews, 2012). By observing the

research participants and their experiences, the researcher begins to make sense of the experiences and new ideas emerge (Charmaz, 2006). Action research, as a professional development approach, was a focus of observation and the data collected about the process and the participants' perceptions provided a clearer conclusion of its applicability. The qualitative design allowed research to go beyond a compilation of facts about the topic. Utilizing a variety of sources lead to a broader study of the process of implementing action research and to a deeper level of understanding about its potential as a professional development tool.

Action research as a topic of observation aligns with the qualitative design. According to Glesne (2011), the study of action research has emerged over time. In the mid-1900s, Kurt Lewin adopted a positivist paradigm and studied action research from a distance. With a hands-off approach, Lewin relied on cycles of evaluation and intervention to improve the business industry (Glesne, 2011). According to Lewin (1946), the initial aim of action research was to improve strategies and processes within an environment. However, more recently in the education field, researchers utilize action research as a way to improve classroom practices and are emerged in the research process through observation, reflection and intentional action (Glesne, 2011). Intense observation of classroom practices and routines leads to a reflective phase. During reflection, data are interpreted and feedback is cultivated to gain multiple points of view. After collaborative discussions, an action phase is initiated that involves planning and implementing new ideas to make positive changes in the classroom (Glesne, 2011). The research process in this model is based on collaboration and the inclusion of all major stakeholders. The

researcher acts as the facilitator of the process and functions more effectively when a part of the organization (Glesne, 2011).

Grounded theory approach. Due to the collaborative nature and emerging understanding of the topic, this study embraced a grounded theory approach to explore professional development and action research from the viewpoint of the participants in order to explain the role action research plays in the professional development process of early childhood educators. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory was developed to provide a path to develop further theories based on emerging data. It was also developed as a tool to explain human interaction (Andrews, 2012). This approach supports an emergence of ideas where important concepts are put into categories and then coded for understanding. Grounded theory “provides us with relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations, and applications” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.1). Grounded theory represents a substantive rather than a formal theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The components that defined grounded theory for Glaser and Strauss (1967) were:

- Sampling aimed toward development of theory
- Involvement in data collection and analysis
- Constructing codes and categories
- Making comparisons during each phase of the analysis
- Developing new theory as data builds and analysis is understood
- Defining relationships between categories
- Reviewing literature after the data collection and analysis

The process. Grounded theory allows the inquirer to generate a theory derived from the processes and interactions of the participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). With grounded theory, a new theory emerges during the process of observation and submersion in the environment (Glaser, 2012). An example of how the involvement of the researcher leads to the development of theory is when they become engaged in a grounded theory approach to seek the personal perspective of the participants of the study “allowing the development of an integrated theory of the phenomenon” (Gibson, Dollarhide & Moss, 2010, p. 24).

Small sample size. The theory emerges while the researcher is embedded within the group. For that reason, grounded theory has been identified to be effective with a small organizational unit where theory was generated from evidence collected during personal observations allowing new concepts to emerge (Bore, 2006). According to Pilnick and Swift (2010), a small sample size cultivates focused data collection in qualitative studies. The process included a consistent presence of the researcher in the early childhood environments to observe the participants and the process to allow a theory to emerge.

Limited study timeframe. A consistent presence in the early childhood environment allowed for a more limited timeframe for the study. With this qualitative approach, data collection was streamlined while emphasizing analyses of the action taking place and the process. Once knowledge was acquired in a particular area, the thought patterns and processes began to change rapidly in participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It required an intense submersion in the environment being studied in order to

collect data as it emerged. This expedited the research timeframe and required the researcher to spend more time submerged in the learning environment to gather data as it rapidly changed (Charmaz, 2006).

According to Charmaz (2006), building rapport is essential, so a condensed amount of time engrossed in the environment rather than sporadic observations is more effective and leads to more quality data. Data collection in the grounded theory method allows for sudden shifts in interpretation of the data, which ultimately strengthens the study by showing the data is not forced by the researcher (Charmaz, 2006).

In addition, time for professional development is described in the amount of time the participant spends in application and reflection. The span of time for professional development, in relation to weeks or months, is not the main factor in training conducted while on the job (Guskey & Kwang Suk, 2009). Job-embedded training is effective due to its accelerated format. Training and observation conducted while in the job setting provides an effective learning opportunity yielding higher quality and faster results (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012). The information gained from observations in the job setting about the perceptions of the participants during the study were useful information in formulating future decisions about professional development and the use of action research as a viable option in a variety of fields.

Interviews were able to be scheduled as the process of implementation progressed and being on site every day made scheduling flow more smoothly. Furthermore, once theoretical application had occurred, there was no benefit in extending the data collection due to over complication of the data (Glaser, 2012). According to Glaser (2012), once

there is enough information to identify a core category with 4 to 6 subcategories, then a theory can be comprised.

Emerging theory. Creswell (2007) identifies grounded theory as the best approach when a theory is not available to describe a process. In the creation of an emerging theory, a higher level of understanding about the topic emerges and further explanation of strategies to improve practices are identified (Glesne, 2011).

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), it is suggested that the researcher not engage in research about a topic before personally exploring the topic through qualitative data collection strategies. This study differs from the original approach due to prior research analysis on the topic of professional development and action research; however very little research was found related to applying action research in the early childhood setting. Since little research has been conducted in the early childhood field as it relates to action research, then the grounded theory approach was best suited to identify new research in this area. The process was to collect as much data as possible from the small scale study to create further interest in continuing research in the area of early childhood and action research.

According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), grounded theory goes beyond a description to a higher level of understanding and explanation. When studying a particular area of concern in the classroom, descriptions offer no remedy. It is through the application of research that positive changes occur in the environment. Grounded theory methods reveal enlightened views of the research due to the explorative nature and analysis of emerging ideas (Charmaz, 2006). This allows the process to move quickly due

to the emergence of new ideas and the elevation of excitement that accompanies the new found knowledge.

The participants. With the grounded theory approach, the participants describe their experiences with a particular phenomenon to help provide a framework for further research (Creswell, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The participants are an active part of the research as they collaborate about ideas first during the “visioning” stage; formulate a plan of action during the “combinatorial calm” stage; and prepare to implement the strategies in the “readiness” stage (Bore, 2006, p. 416). This process of collaboration elevates the participant to a level of expertise as they take ownership of their own professional development process (Grossman & Arnold, 2011).

The participants were selected for the study using theoretical sampling. The process allowed the researcher to choose participants who would best contribute to the development of the proposed theory and eliminated unneeded distractions with overwhelming data (Creswell, 2007; Glaser & Strauss; 1967). This process ensured participants were chosen for their theoretical relevance to the study (Glaser & Strauss; 1967). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), the process begins by selecting a homogeneous sample of individuals to study. The purpose in studying a similar group of individuals is to see what concepts emerge in this homogeneous sample. Other individuals outside the parameters of this group can be added at a later time for more depth in study, but in order to begin to formulate ideas about the theory it is necessary to saturate the data collection and this is achieved with a smaller participant pool (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The data. A constant comparative method of data analysis was used to connect with emerging themes while discovering the new theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data was constantly compared simultaneously while still collecting data. A variety of data collection techniques were utilized to develop the grounded theory based on data. Interviews, observations, and journals were analyzed along with a continual review of literature to make contributions to the formation of the theory (Podvey, Hinojosa, & Koenig, 2010). Detailed procedures for analysis were employed during the study with three phases of coding: Open, Axial, and Selective (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998).

Open coding. During the open coding phase, categories were developed by examining text and using a constant comparative approach. The classification of concepts were formed through the descriptions in categories (Puolakka, Haapasalo-Pesu, & Astedt-Kurki, 2013). Once a category was saturated then other properties or subcategories were identified for clarification. As the researcher, I identified a single category from the open coding list to be the emerging central phenomenon of interest, which supported more data collection in that area (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Axial coding. During the axial coding phase, the categories were examined for connectivity to determine which categories related or supported explanation for the emerging central phenomenon. Data were examined to identify any factors related to the emerging phenomenon (Puolakka et al., 2013). Once the central phenomenon had been clearly identified, causes of the phenomenon were explored (Glaser, 2012). A visual model was created to organize the connectors related to the phenomenon.

Selective coding. Selective coding was then utilized to formulate stronger connections to generate the emerging theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). This is where the relationships were validated and explanations were developed for the connections. Selective coding began once the core idea had been clearly identified (Glaser, 2004). Categories were identified that needed further development and refinement (Puolakka et al., 2013). At that point, the information collected provided a basis for formulating a clear theory through the description of the categories.

The application of research. The new theory can be applied in a learning environment to enable participants to approach existing problems in new way from their own perspective. The settings and participants provided an active environment for continual research. It is through an active environment where experiences can be analyzed and future decisions about professional development can be made. This type of framework for research can best be described as an interpretivist approach, which has also been described as a constructivist approach (Glesne, 2011).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The review begins by establishing the basis for the qualitative approach through the alignment of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model and the connection between professional development and positive changes in the learning environment. The lack of positive change in a learning environment has been connected to poorly designed professional development activities (Malm, 2009). It is this connection that has prompted this review of literature.

The review further explores the barriers that are faced when implementing professional development and gaps in research related to the topic. Various models of professional development are explored including face-to-face training; online learning communities and utilizing action research as a professional development tool.

As a model, action research emerged as a viable way to improve learning environments and to empower educators to make lasting pedagogical changes (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012). There was a considerable amount of research outlining the benefits of action research and the process of implementing in secondary school environments (Mills, 2011; Razfar, 2011; West, 2011). However, there was a noticeable deficit in the application of action research in early childhood environments.

Collaborative modes of delivery were a common theme throughout the review of literature. The conceptual framework for learning further explains the process and benefits of embracing a collaborative model, which further supports the implementation

of action research as a professional development approach due to its active participation processes. The conceptual framework provides a model for delineating the phases of the collaborative process.

Conceptual Framework

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory

Kolb (1984) provides a theory of learning that encourages learners to put theory into practice. "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). The premise of the theory is learning through exploration and reflection. According to Kolb (1984; 2008), the process of the learning experience leads to a change in overall perception.

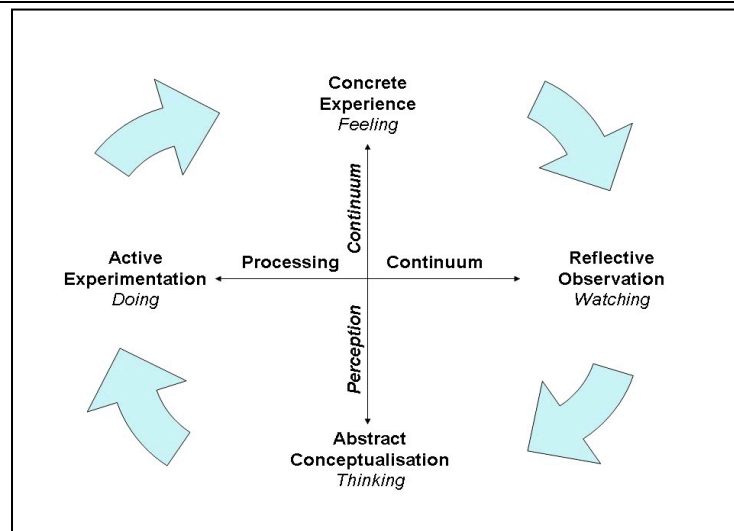


Figure 1. Kolb's experiential learning model. This figure demonstrates the process that is present for learning to occur. Adapted from a visual diagram. From "Experiential Learning Theory: A Dynamic, Holistic Approach to Management Learning, Education and Development," by A.Y. Kolb and D.A. Kolb, 2008, *Weatherhead School of Management*, p. 6. Copyright 2008 by Case Western Reserve University. Reprinted with permission.

Based on Kolb's experiential learning model (1984), there are six main characteristics of experiential learning:

- Learning is a process, not an outcome (p. 26)
- Learning is continually grounded in experience (p.27)
- Learning is a process of adapting and resolving conflict (p. 29)
- Learning is a holistic process encompassing many layers of meaning and experience (p.31)
- Learning requires interaction between the person and environment (p. 34)
- Learning is a social process of creating knowledge (p. 36)

Kolb (1984) emphasizes that learners can enter in the cycle of learning at any point, but they will naturally progress through each area in the cycle: (a) experiencing, (b) reflecting, (c) conceptualizing, and (d) actively experimenting. In the learning process, there is a natural connection between collaboration and actively experimenting with a concept. Kolb (1984) stipulates that through the process of reflection and conceptualization, a change in perception occurs that alters the final process and leads to further active exploration. This idea is aligned with this study in initiating action research as an active professional development method for the purposes of gaining insight into the perceptions of the early childhood educators during the process.

Guiding Research

The conceptual framework, based on Kolb's experiential learning model (1984), provides a basis for the qualitative design and specifically a systematic grounded theory design. The grounded theory study explains a process and describes in detail the

experiences and perceptions of the participants as they engage in action research as a professional development model (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to Kolb (1984), active participation and reflection lead to an analysis of the process and the creation of positive changes in the learning environment. An amalgamation of the two areas of research, Kolb's learning model (1984) and the grounded theory design (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), provide a complimentary framework to examine the process of implementing action research as a professional development model.

A grounded theory design also encouraged active participation and a continual process of data collection. A simultaneous collection and analysis of data, known as constant comparative analysis, was a key component of the grounded theory research to support data collection in an active and emerging environment (Podvey, Hinojosa, & Koenig, 2010). Moving from specific observations to broad generalizations is aligned with the grounded theory approach that is "inductive in nature and uses a set of techniques and procedures such as theoretical sampling, constant comparison and the use of a coding system to develop a theory about the phenomenon under study" (Zafeiriou, Nunes & Ford, 2001, p. 85). These qualitative data collection methods enable the researcher to collect information in an active and rapidly changing environment (Charmaz, 2006). These data collection methods will be discussed in more detail when exploring data analysis methods; however the collection process is aligned with Kolb's experiential learning model by supporting the process of collaboration and exploration toward new knowledge (Kolb, 1984).

Additional research further supports the collaborative nature of the conceptual framework and the process of examining action research as a professional development model (Razfar, 2011; Vogrinc & Valenčič Zuljan, 2009; West, 2011). Collaboration is coupled with acquiring new knowledge, which leads to an altered perception on professional development methods (Meister, 2010). Within a collaborative setting, new knowledge can be formed and eventually applied in the learning environment (O'Mara & Gutierrez, 2010). The application of knowledge leads to positive changes in the environment, which leaves educators feeling empowered (Tasker, Johnson, & Davis, 2010). The empowerment increases their desire to engage in more collaborative processes in the future (Bradley-Levine, Smith & Carr, 2009). This process of collaboration is further supported in research and dichotomized with Kolb's learning theory (1984) and the qualitative design of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Collaborative professional development. Collaborative environments were cited as one of the main reasons educators continued with more demanding models of professional development and led to sustaining involvement beyond the required timeline (O'Mara & Gutierrez, 2010). Sharing and reflection were themes which emerged in one research project focused on identifying more appropriate ways to approach literacy in the classroom (O'Mara & Gutierrez, 2010). According to O'Mara and Gutierrez (2010), the collaborative nature of the project led to more professional satisfaction and a revitalized view of professional development. The researchers cited the need for more extensive studies in the area of teachers as researchers.

Application of learning. Having the ability to apply the knowledge learned was of importance to educators (Tasker, Johnson & Davis, 2010). Part of the motivation for learners to seek new knowledge and training is to be able to apply what they have learned in meaningful ways. Having the opportunity to take the new ideas and utilize them immediately in the professional environment validates the professional development process for the learner (Baran & Cagiltay, 2010).

Change in environment. The application of new knowledge in the professional setting leads to positive changes in the learning environment (Duncan-Howell, 2010). As educators implement new strategies learned in a professional development setting, they are cognizant of the positive changes in their classroom. This awareness leads to a sense of empowerment as the educators realize they have the ability to make positive and significant changes (Bradley-Levine et al., 2009).

Educators empowered. The sense of empowerment gives them confidence to try new things and a feeling of being in control of their professional environments (Bradley-Levine et al., 2009). According to Malm (2009), educators need to feel a part of the process of professional development, which leads to higher self-efficacy. The empowerment they feel over their professional environment encourages them to seek out more professional development opportunities.

Ongoing professional development. The process of professional development is the focus of inquiry in the literature review. In order for educators to continue to perform at high levels, they need to engage in ongoing professional development. However, professional development methods have been criticized for not producing significant

changes in teaching practices or student performance (Malm, 2009). It has been a challenge in many settings to ensure the professional development is of high quality and in a format that is conducive for learner participation (Meister, 2010). The review of literature examines the need for quality professional development; the barriers associated with producing high quality professional development experiences; the role of the educator in the process of applying professional development methods; and the various models of delivery for professional development including action research.

Review of the Literature

Much has been written about the benefits of professional development. The effectiveness of how educators interact in their classrooms, with families, and with colleagues is all linked to the quality of professional development opportunities and their willingness to participate. In addition, many studies have been conducted on the specific needs of educators and the barriers in place that impede professional progress.

In relation to the educational discipline, there was a significant amount of literature that focused on the need to make changes to current professional development practices (Malm, 2009). A search for more appropriate models of professional development was a primary focus in the research. This combination of literature will serve as a basis for identifying areas of professional development which need to be redesigned and will place emphasis on the educator's role in their own development.

The review begins by examining the literature that identifies the need to design a more appropriate model of professional development. Next, it analyzes the barriers to the implementation of appropriate professional development and ways to overcome the

barriers. It continues by summarizing the literature related to the role educators have in their own development and strategies for implementing new knowledge in the classroom setting. The review concludes with a review of the literature related to the varying models of professional development available to learners, including action research and collaborative strategies. The summary of the literature provides support for a collaborative model of professional development. It specifically narrows the focus of the grounded theory study to the experiences of implementing action research. The need to design a more appropriate model of professional development is the subject of the following literature. The recurrent theme of searching for a catalyst to change professional development practices was evident throughout the articles reviewed.

Need for Appropriate Professional Development

Quality education is connected to quality teachers and quality teachers are directly linked with their level of professional development (Kennedy, 2006). The types of professional development in which educators engage are crucial. It is no longer satisfactory for professional development to offer “bromides and exhortations” (Kennedy, 2006, p. 19). Training needs to be designed to increase the quality of teaching by making professional development topics more relevant for the current teaching situation (Kennedy, 2006). The most relevant situation is job-embedded training (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012). With professional development taking place in the workplace, participants have access to everything they need to come to a greater understanding of their dilemma. They have immediate access to issues; collaborative discussions; continual feedback; and peer observations (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012).

Relevant training. There is no challenge to the argument that professional development is important and leads to more positive classroom outcomes. However, if professional development trainings neglect to prepare educators to handle the “unpredictable and unreliable teaching environment” (Kennedy, 2006, p. 18), then all the knowledge they have will make less of an impact. Quality professional development experiences need to be relevant to move educators from acquiring knowledge to the rigorous application of knowledge, rather than pacifying them with less challenging topics. According to Kapachtsi and Kakana (2012), professional development training should “integrally involve teachers not only in the assessment of their own needs, interests and concerns, but also in planning, development and implementation of changes” (p. 36).

Administrators as advocates. Wiggins and McTighe (2006) also examined the need for quality professional development and placed the burden of advocating for more appropriate models of training on school leaders and administrators. As a learning facility, schools should be a model for learning. As a professional organization, educators should be professional learners and should be required to be familiar with the latest research in the field (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006). Just as students are required to work together collaboratively in a classroom, educators should be modeling those techniques in their own professional development. However, many times educators are isolated in classrooms and lack the opportunity to engage in continual reflection and analysis with colleagues. Wiggins and McTighe (2006), identify two areas in which improvement is needed as related to professional development delivery. The first area of improvement

was to personalize instruction by acknowledging learners' interests, strengths, prior knowledge and curiosity to make the instruction more relevant. The second area of improvement was to bring awareness to how the new knowledge can be transferred to the learning environment. Without improving these two areas, professional development is reduced to "merely a day-filling smorgasbord, a tasting of interesting tidbits that teachers are free to try out or ignore" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006, p. 29).

As related to professional development, Dufour and Mattos (2013) advocate administrators have greater improvement in their schools when they apply the philosophy of empowerment for teachers. When administrators encourage a culture of collaboration among their teachers, they hold their colleagues accountable for areas needing improvement and share ideas collectively to support that improvement (Dufour & Mattos, 2013). This type of advocacy from administrators leads to more engaged educators.

Engaged educators. Intrator and Kunzman (2006) emphasized the need for more meaningful professional development such as activities that "cultivate their capacity to teach with greater consciousness, self-awareness, and integrity" (p. 39). In their opinion, "no amount of professional development focused merely on technical proficiency will matter to teachers who are feeling overwhelmed, adrift in their mission, or disconnected from like-minded colleagues" (Intrator & Kunzman, 2006, p. 39). By redirecting the professional development approaches toward reflection and renewal, educators reported a renewed sense of passion and clarity in their instruction (Intrator & Kunzman, 2006). Their passion and clarity are further supported as they share teaching practices with colleagues and witness strategies enhancing the learning environment (Dufour & Mattos,

2013). By articulating a personal vision and translating that vision into best practices, educators are more engaged and motivated to apply new techniques in the classroom. This allows them to experience the highest level of professional development, which leads to more teachers staying in the profession (Dufour & Mattos, 2013). Although there are obvious benefits to appropriate and meaningful professional development, as previously discussed; unfortunately there are often barriers that prevent the implementation of appropriate strategies.

Barriers to Implementing Appropriate Professional Development

With the increase in responsibilities in the classroom, educators find it difficult to prioritize professional development. Significant barriers to implementing appropriate professional development need to be identified and eradicated for the overall improvement to educational practices.

According to Mills (2011), specific barriers in implementing appropriate professional development can include lack of resources; resistance to change; reluctance to interfere with others' professional practices; lack of forum to share what has been learned; and making time for professional endeavors. By identifying each barrier ahead of time, teachers and administrators can work together to minimize the barriers through open conversations about the anticipated difficulties and possible solutions that are comfortable for all involved.

Lack of resources. In order to become engaged in learning something new, the educator needs to have access to a variety of resources they can reference and study during the process. Resources can include a variety of materials such as books, articles,

artifacts, videos, outlines, and online information. Without additional resources for the educators to examine and manipulate, they become more passive learners listening to lecture-style training. Mills (2011) suggests a collaborative effort between educators and administrators in deciding what resources would be necessary to achieve the desired level of knowledge. Schweitzer and Stephenson (2008) describe resources as not being costly, but more effective for what is being taught. Engaging in games, role-playing situations, creating plans, and applying new knowledge in scenarios are very low cost options, but can be very effective in knowledge acquisition (Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008).

Resistance to change. At times resources are not of concern, but the attitude of the learner can be a significant barrier. Resources can be acquired fairly quickly, but a change in attitude could take an exorbitant amount of time that may not be available. Matzen and Edmunds (2007) describe the shift in the modalities of administering professional development and the difficulties some educators have with a change in the routine. As an example, the education profession has moved more slowly into utilizing technology due to diversity of ages and experiences of the workforce even though some areas of teaching could be enhanced with this tool. However, by being open to new ways of receiving information and training, educators have an abundance of opportunities to gain new knowledge to make impacts in their teaching practices (Matzen & Edmunds, 2007). According to Guskey and Kwang Suk (2009), it is not always the absence of information which hinders significant changes in the environment. Educators hinder the effectiveness of professional development knowledge when they do not see merit in applying the new information (Guskey & Kwang Suk, 2009). Unfortunately, many

educators feel they have reached a pinnacle of knowledge and are unwilling to engage in new practices.

Reluctance to interfere with professional practices. This unwillingness to engage in ongoing professional development is sometimes a result of educators wanting to hold steadfast to older ways (O'Mara & Gutierrez, 2010). Even with the support of administration, many educators do not feel comfortable interfering with other educators' professional practices. However, in order for substantive change to occur, it is crucial for all educators to align their approaches in a unified setting. Mills (2011) identified in some learning settings it is the administrator that does not want to infringe upon more experienced educators and will often sacrifice the level of professional development for peace in the workplace.

Lack of collaborative forums. Collaboration among colleagues is also important, but often difficult to organize. With various locations and schedules, it makes it difficult to schedule time to collaborate with a group of educators. O'Mara and Gutierrez (2010) acknowledged that educators that are motivated to attend additional training are often heavily involved in their schools due to their motivation. One participant in their study on collaboration had full support of administration and funding to attend trainings, but was unable to attend the collaborative sessions away from school (O'Mara & Gutierrez, 2010). However, technology enhanced learning environments offer an option for collaboration when distance is an issue. The technology enhanced blended learning design allows participants to work with diverse communities of learners to engage in reflection-in-action (Cooner, 2010). The reflection-in-action approach prompts educators

to view case studies online and reflect on their personal responses to the scenarios. Other reflective activities include online journaling, viewing lectures and analyzing a variety of learning strategies.

Even though technology has been identified in some research as a “transformative power on teaching and learning” (Matzen & Edmunds, 2007, p. 417), this type of professional development can be seen as a barrier due to the varying computer competencies among participants. The need for online communities is a response from the increase in educators needing updated professional development. However, the barrier of not being able to utilize technology effectively would need to be eliminated before this model would be appropriate. Once the barrier is removed, the online environment allows for larger numbers of participants and a wider variety of experiences to be shared by participants. According to Denton (2012), professional development can be enhanced by embracing technology. Participants can share knowledge quickly and simultaneously with more efficiency through online cohorts (Denton, 2012). The large online cohort model creates an area of focus, but allows for smaller cohorts to emerge through the process of learning and sharing. Making the initial connection is the crucial part of the process. After connections are made, the direction of the learning and reflection can change over time to meet the needs of the educators more specifically.

Lack of time for professional endeavors. O’Mara and Gutierrez (2010) highlighted lack of time as a barrier for educators that wanted to engage in professional endeavors, but responsibilities at their school prevented them from having the time to collaborate. Being in the classroom with students during the first part of the day only

affords the afternoons and evenings for professional development. Educators during these times are not always focused and often not operating with full cognitive ability. By taking away the time barrier and allowing professionals to engage in training at their convenience and comfort is appealing (Mills, 2011). Online communities can help educators make those needed connections at times that compliment their current schedules (Duncan-Howell, 2010). The increase of online communities is in response to a growing number of educators being technologically driven and time deficient. The natural source of information for most educators today is the Internet. The use of the Internet as a research tool has increased more over the last five years and because of this increase, it becomes a part of the training process (Duncan-Howell, 2010). The barrier in this case is the variety of software and varying levels of comfort with using technology. Even the technology itself can be a barrier if it does not function properly such as loss of internet signal or software incapacibilities. Once the barriers are identified and addressed, the online community can serve as a comprehensive professional development tool to be utilized at anytime by participants.

Technology as possible solution. Duncan-Howell (2010) studied three online communities of teacher learners. The communities were surveyed and asked twenty-five open-ended questions around four specific topics. The topics inquiry included background, professional development programs, online communities and information/communication technology. The purpose of the questions and analysis was to identify if professional development was meeting their specific needs and if the online communities were more effective than the traditional models of inquiry. The results

showed a strong indicator that online communities were effective and were likely to increase as professional development needs and numbers of participants both increase (Duncan-Howell, 2010). However, the face-to-face interactions were still cited as a missing component.

As an online presence increases in the dynamics of the professional development movement, the need to implement a variety of online activities also increases. Hou, Chang and Sung (2009), explore one of those online activities known as blogging. Blogging is becoming a representative tool for professional development online (Hou, Chang, & Sung, 2009). Blogs promote collaboration among users and is a simple tool for sharing ideas and reflecting on current practices. Although researchers point out the barrier that blogging capabilities can be limiting, the tool's capability as a forum for knowledge sharing and open topic discussion is powerful. Blogging provides an easy to use technology tool for educators to engage in professional discussions and sharing additional information through links and downloads. Blogging can be used to record the experiences of educators as they participate in professional development activities.

By being proactive and taking the time to problem-solve, these identified barriers can be eliminated leading to significant benefits to the learning environment. The support and attention of administrators is needed to monitor possible barriers and to ensure a smoother implementation of professional development initiatives. However, the educator has just as an important role in seeking out and administering their own professional development.

Educator Role in Professional Development

Malm (2009) explored the diversity and complexity of the new learning environments that require educators to be participants in seeking additional professional development. Malm (2009) discussed the need to focus more on personal dispositions of the educators to identify the most appropriate form of professional training. The purpose of training is to move the individuals in a new direction or to refine current skill sets. The lack of quality professional development leads to stagnation in educational, professional settings. In order to overcome this stagnation, Malm (2009) acknowledges the importance of involving educators in the process of choosing professional development to identify specific needs of the educators involved in the process and leading to quality training. The result of that involvement leads to targeted training programs and better outcomes for professionals and students. Involving educators in the professional development planning is crucial for the success of the process. Dunst and Raab (2010) explored ways to involve educators in planning their own development by providing a variety of training delivery options and gaining feedback from educators about strengths and challenges.

Educator feedback. Dunst and Raab (2010) studied the effects of three types of in-service training and included the participants by having them evaluate the training and self-evaluate their own growth through the process. Study participants engaged in three types of training: on-site training in their classroom; two to three day workshops; and weeklong intensive trainings. After the trainings were completed, participants were asked to evaluate each experience individually to identify strengths and challenges of each training model. Gaining the insight from participants not only concerning their

preferences, but also how they were applying the information proved to be a successful strategy in identifying appropriate professional development models. This method utilized communicating with educators directly to see what worked and what did not work professionally. Communicating directly with the professionals that are most affected by training choices was a theme that emerged from another article review.

Educator choices. Tasker, Johnson and Davis (2010) examined a teacher directed method of approaching professional development. Inquiry based professional development is another term for on-site professional development that is driven by teacher interests and needs. The article examined the social cultural aspect of training adults and how being a part of the professional development planning process empowered educators to improve professional practices and to have a deeper sense of ownership over their own learning. Providing choices for the educators allowed them to be a part of the process and have a sense of ownership for their own learning (Tasker, Johnson & Davis, 2010).

Models of Professional Development

With so many choices and strategies available for administering training for educators, it is important to explore some of the models of professional development in determining the best avenue to pursue in the constructivist approach.

Sociocultural model. Based on work by Vygotsky (1978), the social context of learning provides an ideal environment for sharing ideas and functioning in a zone of proximal development. By functioning in this zone, more experienced educators can assist less experienced educators in gaining knowledge and skills that they would have

been slow to gain through self-exploration. The social aspect allows educators to improve at a faster pace and learning environments directly benefit from the applied knowledge (Hmelo-Silver, Chernobilsky, & Jordan, 2008). The collaborative nature of professional development in a social cultural model is evident in other areas of research concerning training and development.

Peer-to-peer learning model. Guldberg (2008) analyzed how adult learners interact with others during professional development opportunities and how peer-to-peer learning can be utilized to improve overall professional practices among those involved. The data in the study supports the idea that interaction can promote a sense of camaraderie and lead to a construction of knowledge that supports reflective analysis of learning. Distance education assisted in the peer-to-peer exchange of ideas. Technology was noted in several research articles as a catalyst for improving collaborative professional development.

Online learning model. In an informative article by Reese (2014), online forums were identified as a key strategy to connecting educators to one another. Through the connections built through online forums, educators became more comfortable sharing areas of professional need and seeking advice from other educators. The importance of the applicability of information provided through the online community was explored. The lack of face-to-face contact played a role in how serious the participants took the training. However, the online learning model is projected to only increase as educators have less time and become more involved in life situations (Reese, 2014). Another study

that discussed the role technology plays in promoting self-directed professional development was described by Polly and Hannafin (2010).

Learner-centered model. Polly and Hannafin (2010) explore learner-centered professional development (LCPD) as a strategy to enhance professional learning environments. Again, focusing on the educator as the expert in training delivery modality, research supports involving educators in the professional development planning process. It is necessary to have the buy-in for the types of training to be offered in order to move educators in a more positive direction in their own self-directed learning. Focused goals for bridging achievement gaps in the student learning environment serve as a starting point for training themes. For example, if student grades are falling in the area of writing and comprehension, then training options will be targeted toward assisting educators in learning new strategies to teach writing and comprehension. The article reexamines the role of technology as a viable source of manageable professional development. With the use of technology, educators can virtually plan their own professional development schedule around their current obligations rather than resenting the training due to the intrusiveness of a rigid schedule.

Reflective practices model. Technology was cited in several other studies such as one conducted by Cooner (2010), which examines the creation of large online cohorts to serve as an arena for reflecting on best practices. Reflection of practices and collaboration with other educators was cited as being a catalyst for future professional development endeavors. When educators have the ability to analyze lessons and strategies utilized in the classroom, they find there are always areas to improve practices.

Seamon (2008) utilizes narrative inquiry to encourage educators to tell the stories of their classrooms and personally reflect on areas of challenge and triumph. Other educators are invited to share similar stories and through the process share beliefs to lead to improvement in practices (Seamon, 2008).

Metacognition, as an alternative thought pattern, is also aligned with a reflective model. This “thinking about thinking” strategy, or metacognition, leads educators to reflect on their current understandings and create new levels of understanding through personal and group reflection (Ivers, 2012, p. 51). Metacognition is a necessary component to move the participants in professional development to higher levels of thought and application (Ivers, 2012). The higher level of thought about the process will most likely lead to higher levels of pride and sense of accomplishment. Ivers (2012) asserts that higher levels of critical thinking will occur among educators when they have the opportunity to reflect on practices and explore areas where they still have questions.

Action Research Emerges

Action research began to emerge as a professional practice being applied in a variety of professional settings. Action research had been a topic that had been present in educational literature for a number of years, but had not been identified as a tool for training. It was mainly identified as a type of research utilized in a variety of fields. Action research methods are aligned with many of the previous professional development models discussed and would provide a structure for observation of participants.

Collaborative focus. Collaboration was one of the repetitive themes that emerged in each article noting action research as a professional development method. Participants

were using collaboration to share ideas and as a form of accountability when implementing strategies for a collective purpose (Newton & Burgess, 2008).

Teacher empowerment. In an article outlining the benefits of this type of research, action research was described as beneficial because it “empowers teachers to construct knowledge and make it available to others, for their own professional benefit and the benefit of children and families” (Adams & Warner, 2001, p. 27). The collaborative nature of action research led to positive changes in the learning environments as a whole. If one teacher was experiencing a particular problem, the likelihood of other teachers having similar issues was likely. The authors described the positive benefits for the teachers and their colleagues, as well as the children and family in their care. Action research was not specifically noted as a professional development method in this early research article; however the process of researching to make changes in the environment constitutes professional development.

In a later article, professional development was a main theme throughout the article. Empowering teachers to become leaders in their own classrooms will lead them to become advocates in the field (Diana, 2011). By engaging in action research, teachers view professional development as an ongoing process and previous topics serve as springboards for future studies. By taking such an active role in their own professional development, teachers feel empowered to make changes in their classroom and beyond (Diana, 2011).

Teachers as researchers. Action research utilized as a professional development method in the learning environment promotes the development of teachers as researchers

in their own classroom. With continuous support and resources, the professional environment will be catapulted into a higher realm where educators would be transformed and practices refined. By developing these skills, teachers can become catalysts in their own environments to transform their own practices based on research (Diana, 2011). Research-based practices would become a reality rather than an educational buzz word.

In another article, action research was viewed as a catalyst to emphasize learning leading to “authentic and situated learning opportunities” (Razfar, 2011, p. 37). Developing teachers as researchers is vital in the progression of the education field. Through ongoing professional development, teachers reach new heights in their own professional journey and action research serves as a “mode of inquiry” that empowers teachers to “persist in finding solutions to everyday pedagogical issues” (Razfar, 2011, p. 39).

Reflective teachers. Action research was identified as a professional development activity in an article that discussed how teacher reflection becomes intentional and transformative (West, 2011). The author identifies education as a more isolated profession and promotes the need for a more collaborative approach to professional development. West (2011) suggests collaborative research among teachers can become a meaningful form of professional exploration and the action research model provides a system that can have multiple benefits including reflective practices. Some of those benefits were also highlighted in an article focusing more on the collaborative form of action research.

According to Razfar (2011), becoming reflective teachers was not always an easy task. At times the process was described as “difficult, messy and demanding” by teachers in one study implementing action research (p. 41). Knowing where to begin in reflecting on practices and putting aside their own biases was challenging, but beneficial in the end. The teachers learned to become comfortable with the uncertainty of the projects and to utilize the reflective aspect as a way to work through classroom issues (Razfar, 2011).

Teacher efficiency and effectiveness. Collaborative action research can benefit the school environment, but has a more meaningful impact on the teachers’ overall efficiency in the classroom and professionalism when working with colleagues (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012). In a study conducted in Greece, teachers were given the opportunity to reflect on their own classrooms and worked collaboratively with other teachers to solve some of the issues they were facing. Peer observation was introduced as a tool for improvement and follow-up brainstorming sessions were encouraged to share teaching techniques among participants. As a form of action research, the teachers were able to make improvements in their classroom and teaching styles. The participants were noted as having positive experiences with this type of collaboration and the changes were more permanent and impactful (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012).

Action research was also the focus of an analysis of methods discussed by Vogrinc and Valenčič Zuljan (2009). The collaborative nature of research in a school setting and reflecting on current practices to make positive changes make action research an appropriate research design when change in practice is the goal. Through a collaborative process, educators engage in ongoing research and application to

continually analyze the effectiveness of the methods used, which makes them more efficient educators. Action research provides the framework for the study conducted by Vogrinc and Valenčič Zuljan (2009) where it embraces the importance of the process and the final product. The educator learns through the process what is effective and in the end the new knowledge is applied in the setting to make significant positive changes. The unique relationships of the researchers who are working toward a similar goal, add to the effectiveness of the action research approach. Relationships between the participants were a focal point in the research conducted by Guldberg (2008).

Higher education connection. Other articles emerged about action research and the focus it was receiving in the higher education realm. Degree programs are embracing action research as part of the curriculum in preparing future teachers.

Connecting research and practice. The role of action research in connecting research and practice for teachers in a graduate degree cohort was examined in a case study conducted at Indiana University (Bradley-Levine et al., 2009). During the study, teachers recognized that many of their colleagues were resistant to implementing action research in their learning environments. However, as the study progressed, those same teachers noticed positive changes in their environments and improved their own teaching practices through the application of knowledge gained. Bradley-Levine et al. (2009) concluded their findings by advocating for action research training to be more accessible to all teachers due to its positive results in inducing ownership over the professional development process. Future research was suggested in the area of moving toward a participatory action inquiry model.

Continual learning. West (2011) viewed action research as not a method of research, but rather a continual format for professional development in the education field. Teachers become more engaged in their own professional development, which leads to higher levels of satisfaction. The increased satisfaction with meeting needs within their environment, rather than waiting for someone on the outside to fix the problem caused teachers to seek out opportunities to engage in action research (West, 2011). Through this process, teachers take more responsibility for their own continual learning.

West (2011) highlights action research as a theme in continuing education, which supports teachers' ongoing learning and development. The process of research and reflection allows teachers to gain confidence in their abilities and moves them toward an attitude, which embraces the process of change. Changing current teaching practices is not an easy task for many educators, however the benefits of embracing change when it is connected to current research is the epitome of a progressive educator. In addition, isolation is often one of the negative aspects of teaching. West (2011) promotes action research as a way to combat isolation through professional conversations and increased collaboration among colleagues. Collaborating with colleagues is a form of continuing education as ideas are analyzed and solidified through implementation. Collaboration can also be among teachers and researchers (West, 2011). The ongoing development of teachers is the focus of the next research review.

Ongoing teacher development. Action research has been gaining respect in the education field as a possible strategy for teacher development. According to Haggarty

and Postlethwaite (2003), action research was identified as a possible tool for improving learning in a mixed comprehensive school in Oxfordshire. Two lecturers from a higher education institute were contacted by the school to find ways to improve differentiation in the learning environment. With the collaborative format, action research was an agreeable match for the task. Emphasizing the reflective practice in action research as a benefit, the lecturers were able to gain the support of the teaching staff to conduct trainings. Teachers developed their practices by revisiting prior knowledge such as conducting research, reflective analysis, and implementing research-based findings. The lecturers suggested being explicit about the process to involve participants earlier in the research and to disseminate the findings to a broader group for more benefits (Haggarty & Postlethwaite, 2003).

West (2011) asserts that teachers become bored with the traditional formats of professional development and action research can encourage ongoing teacher development. Engaging in research can make a meaningful connection especially for veteran teachers who need a higher level of professional development to challenge their previously ingrained knowledge in the ever-changing climate of education (West, 2011).

Tool for learning. Razfar (2011) confirmed that teacher training institutions are embracing action research as a tool for learning. In an article examining the experiences of a cohort designed around an action research model, the participants were trained to utilize action research in their own classroom settings. Their progress was tracked through observations, journals, interviews and focus group sessions. The findings in this study suggested further research needed to be conducted to validate the stance that action

research is a viable and lasting form of professional development. However, the teacher researchers in the study reported feeling empowered and transformed by the process (Razfar, 2011).

Combating preconceived ideas. In another study of a higher education institute, the student researchers were resistant to implementing action research primarily due to their preconceived notions about the term “research” (Bryant & Bates, 2010). The authors were instructors of a master’s level course focused on implementing action research. Their experience with the student researchers revealed an unexpected reaction to their assignment when they introduced the students to action research. The terminology caused a resistant attitude and defeated mentality. Once the process was explained and the students had the opportunity to put their new knowledge in practice, then the preconceived ideas dissipated. This article provided some insight to possible reactions during the implementation of this study.

Summary

With the changing world of education, educators need to be up-to-date in their knowledge of best practices and educational research. In order to make the most impact in this area, professional development methods should be interactive and allow for application of learning. The literature reviewed provides a broad base that supports improving professional practice through redesigning professional development models. Themes which emerged in the research were the need for better designs for professional development models; collaboration among training participants; barriers to professional

development; the role of the educator; the role of technology; and active research as a viable approach.

Transforming Practice

Research in the area of professional development suggested a need for transforming practice and revealed areas of gaps in the current research. Gaps were identified in the connection between action research, professional development, positive changes in the learning environment and the experiences of the educators. More research needs to be conducted to bridge these ideas together to form a new theory for effective professional development implementation in the early childhood setting.

Transforming practice is no longer a suggestion; it is a necessity to compete in the global economy. Educators can become limited in their repertoire of teaching strategies and through collaborative professional development they can build new knowledge and skills. Collaborative training can offer ongoing professional development opportunities for motivated professionals. Collaborative models give educators a sense of belonging and togetherness. They also serve as an accountability group for educators to continually check their instructional strategies with others. Through the implementation of an action research model, educators can take a more active role in their own development. The literature reviewed suggested action research as a viable method for professional development. West (2011) describes action research as “the collaborative construction of knowledge by teachers, students, administrators, parents, and academics” and further describes it as “a platform for developing more equitable social relations” (p. 90). West (2011) describes the transformative nature of action research in terms of a “tool for

effecting classroom and school change” with the object of the approach as able to “transform rather than simply describe school or classroom settings” (p. 90). The nature of transformation is evident in action research and warrants further research to make clearer connections about how it can best be utilized.

Gaps in Research

Although the research in the area of professional development and action research is extensive, there is a gap that needs to be addressed. The current gap identified in the literature review is how to combine the research on the need for effective training strategies and the implementation of action research as a professional development model in the early childhood setting. After an extensive search utilizing the Liberty online library and visiting the local library for hardcopy primary sources, the research still neglected to make connections between implementing action research in early childhood environments as a professional development option. Many articles described collaboration as a strong method for effective professional development. Research also supported action research as a beneficial method of making positive changes in the learning environment, which is a goal of professional development initiatives. However, the connection between action research, professional development, positive changes in the learning environment and the experiences of the educators were not clearly made in the current research. In addition, the early childhood environment was almost non-existent when searching for environments currently utilizing action research.

Teacher perception. One research article discussed teachers’ perceptions of engagement and effectiveness as related to professional development (Meister, 2010).

The gap identified at the conclusion of the article identified the importance of focusing more research in the area of educators' perceptions due to the lack of significant change in practices over the last fifty years. Much research has been dedicated to the benefits and varying models, but little research has focused on the educators specifically and why new strategies are not embraced or implemented in the learning environments.

Challenges to collaboration. Other research focused on collaboration and encouraged future research in the area of teachers as researchers and the need to uncover some of the challenges related to collaboration (O'Mara & Gutierrez, 2010). West (2011) identified unfamiliar territory and breaking away from traditional roles as challenges to collaboration. Suggestions to engage in more dialogue with educators to reveal thoughts and concerns about collaborative relationships revealed a need to focus more on educator experiences. Examining collaboration from the perspective of the participants will lead to more effective practices. More research will be conducted with the specific focus of identifying how this gap in research connects with developing new models of professional development.

Emerging theory. By focusing on the perceptions of the teachers and attempting to overcome the challenges presented by collaboration, the study will attempt to further contribute to closing the gap in research as it relates to implementing action research as a professional development model in an early childhood setting. Evidence-based training should be the primary focus when selecting professional development. However, according to a study on methods for selecting professional development, research rarely includes positive relationships between the characteristics of training and improvements

in instructional practice or student learning outcomes. “No improvement effort has ever succeeded in the absence of thoughtfully planned and well-implemented professional development” (Guskey, 2009, p. 497). For the purposes of this research, the process of implementing action research as a professional development method was explored along with gaining insight into the perceptions of the participants while engaging in the process. The grounded theory approach by design enabled me, as the researcher, to analyze data as collected; identify emerging themes; and make meaningful connections between concepts and processes to identify a new theory (Kisley & Kendall, 2011). By explaining the process, it brought further insight to developing potential professional development opportunities by utilizing action research and identifying methods and strategies to transition professional development methods from an anecdotal stage to an application stage. Other questions were answered concerning educators’ preconceived ideas about action research and the value placed on continuing action research as a viable means of professional development.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this systematic grounded theory study was to gain insight into the process of utilizing action research as a professional development method in an early childhood environment by focusing on the perceptions of the early childhood educators. Grounded theory provides a method for analyzing the meanings and interpretations of experiences by constantly comparing data until a full understanding of the phenomena occurs (Cooney, 2011). This method utilizes an inductive approach to research by immersing oneself in the process of data collection to eventually develop conclusions or theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Jones, 2009). For the purpose of this study, action research was utilized as a method for professional development and was embedded in the job environment.

Grounded theory is an appropriate design when investigating a process, which in this study was action research being implemented in the early childhood environment (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The educators' perceptions of the process provided greater insight into implementing action research as a professional development method. These perceptions can be further utilized to explain how action research can serve as a professional development approach in other early childhood environments in the future.

The following research questions guided the focus of the study:

Central Research Question: How does the process of utilizing action research influence the professional development of early childhood educators as it relates to their professional practices?

Research Sub-Question 1: How do educators perceive action research prior to implementing in an early childhood environment?

Research Sub-Question 2: How do educators perceive collaboration during the process of implementing action research in an early childhood environment?

Research Sub-Question 3: What is the perceived value, by the participants, of implementing action research as a professional development method?

These questions guided the focus of the study along with the theoretical framework utilizing Kolb's experiential learning model (1984) and a grounded theory research design (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the experiential learning model, Kolb (1984) describes the learning process as a natural connection between the active experimentation of a concept and the collaboration taking place in the environment. The process of reflection and conceptualization leads to a change in perception (Kolb, 1984). Further active exploration is a natural product of the change in perception (Kolb, 1984). The grounded theory method aligns with Kolb's model by focusing on the investigation of a process and gaining insight into the perceptions of the participants.

This chapter describes my research design, data collection and analysis procedures, and primary role as the researcher. I also provide a broad discussion of the criteria for selecting sites and participants along with a description of the on-site training model. At the end of the chapter, I discuss how I established trustworthiness in the study.

Research Design

During the initial stages of exploring research designs, I narrowed my focus to three different approaches to inquiry: (a) Case Study, (b) Phenomenological, and (c) Grounded Theory (Creswell, 2007). Each design, in a broad representation, seemed to align with the earlier concepts of the study.

Alternate Designs Explored

Case study. The case study approach was considered initially due to the qualitative collection procedures and descriptive nature. A collective case study approach was considered due to the process of investigating a particular phenomenon or population (Glesne, 2011). However, after further investigation it appeared the case study would not be the best approach due to the more descriptive nature of the final product (Creswell, 2007). I wanted to go a step further and develop a greater understanding of the process, rather than just describing a phenomenon. The phenomenological approach was considered next.

Phenomenological. The phenomenological approach examined a particular phenomenon and also the meaning of the process for the participants (Creswell, 2007). The experiences of the participants were a main focus, which seemed to initially align with the purpose of my study. However, this design also seemed to be more of a description of the process where the participants described their understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). This type of qualitative research is suitable when the purpose is to understand participants' experiences to determine the meaning of the experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I not only wanted to understand the meaning, but I

wanted to identify emerging themes related to the phenomenon. For this reason, the grounded theory approach was the next consideration.

Grounded theory. From the beginning, I wanted to engage in a qualitative design. Qualitative research was appealing to me because I wanted to go beyond focusing on limited numbers and facts to discover a deeper meaning of my topic. However, I also wanted a clear structure to the research procedure. When considering research methods for approaching research in the area of action research and professional development, grounded theory was identified as a useful design due to its flexibility and effective method of allowing the data to guide the research (Charmaz, 2006).

As I began to research grounded theory as an option, I found it to be a method that was systematic and rigorous, but at the same time it offered flexibility (Szeto, 2010). For my study, I wanted to investigate the process of implementing action research in an early childhood environment as a professional development method. In the early stages of researching this topic, I found it difficult to find research that examined the process of implementing action research in an early childhood setting. Most of the research was focused on school age settings and provided information on procedures (Vogrinc & Valenčič Zuljan, 2009).

Lack of Current Theory

The grounded theory design is appropriate when researchers seek to develop a theory or model that describes or explains a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Grounded theory is an appropriate design to use in research when a current theory is not available to explain a process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Through a grounded theory

approach, significant amounts of data are collected for analysis (Jones, 2009). In-depth data collection involves multiple sources of information. This approach is appropriate to observe and record the quickly changing perceptions of the participants based on the researcher's involvement in the data collection and the immediate need to make comparisons during data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A variety of data collection techniques were utilized to develop the grounded theory. Interviews, observations and journals were analyzed along with a continual review of literature to make contributions to the formation of the theory and description of the process (Hüseyin, 2009).

The focus of grounded theory is to develop a theory or greater understanding of an area based on the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Since there is a limited amount of research in the area of early childhood, action research, and professional development, the grounded theory method was appropriate based on the idea of data informing theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). There are no theories available to explain the process of implementing action research in an early childhood environment and how it can be utilized as a professional development method. The data collection methods in grounded theory allowed me to use the data to develop a greater understanding of that process (Jones, 2009). In addition, grounded theory is appropriate in social settings and enables the researcher to gain greater understanding in an area that does not have preformed concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). With very limited research in the area of early childhood and action research, being immersed in the social setting did lead to a clearer understanding of the concepts based on the emerging data (Jones, 2009).

Systematic approach. Using a systematic grounded theory design, I described the process related to implementing action research as a professional development method based on participants' perceptions in the early childhood setting (Swartz & Triscari, 2011). A systematic approach was chosen based on its structure and methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998).

A more flexible design was available that utilizes a constructivist approach rather than following a methodological path (Charmaz, 2006). However, since I am not an expert in grounded theory research, I chose to follow the more scripted methods in the design (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This allowed for some flexibility, but framed the study by using clear guidelines.

The grounded theory study focused on the process of implementation in the early childhood setting and also provided insight into the perceptions of the educators during implementation. The goal of the research was to explain the process of implementing action research as a professional development method along with the perceptions and experiences of the early childhood educators to lead to future research about utilizing action research on a more consistent basis as a professional development model.

Future Research

The systematic grounded theory design was appropriate because the approach allowed me, as the researcher, to explain the process related to action research and professional development to offer a more effective model for administering future training in early learning environments (Jones, 2009). Concepts emerge through the observation of the participants and in the process of "discovering theory, one generates

conceptual categories or their properties from evidence, then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 23). The description and explanation of the process can be used by future researchers for further inquiry and understanding of the concepts. The grounded theory design allows the researcher to "explore, examine and interpret understandings and meanings embedded in the data" (Szeto, 2010, p. 80). The interpretations can be utilized in future research to make decisions about implementing action research as a professional development method in early childhood settings.

Sites

The study took place at two learning facilities that serve children from birth through four-years-old and provide an after-school program for elementary-aged children. The learning facilities were located in adjacent counties and had similar licensing and accreditation levels. Both learning facilities were licensed through the North Carolina Division of Child Development and earning the highest level of five stars.

In addition, each facility was meeting voluntary enhanced guidelines. These guidelines include lower teacher-child ratios, increased professional development for employees and the implementation of a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Each learning center had similar student demographics and accepted subsidy from the Department of Social Services for families with low income.

Some early childhood sites are not allowed much flexibility in introducing new methods due to administering a more scripted curriculum. I selected these sites because

they used a similar curriculum design and action research was an uncomplicated addition to their current curriculum model.

Site One

Site one was an independent preschool that integrated biblical aspects into an academic, project-based curriculum. The base curriculum utilized was Creative Curriculum, which is an approved curriculum through the Division of Child Development. The preschool also utilized an emergent curriculum that embraced the Reggio Emilia and Montessori approaches. They embraced a family-centered approach that involved families in meaningful ways. The preschool earned national accreditation in September 2011 through the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Accreditation is a mark of quality beyond licensure and includes an extensive evaluation and review process of developmentally appropriate practices. The preschool has been in operation since August 2009. The administrator at this site held a Birth-Kindergarten license and had eight years of experience working in early childhood environments.

Site Two

Site two was a secular-based program utilizing more of a theme-based curriculum. The facility had earned accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children and had maintained that accreditation for two five-year terms. This site utilized Creative Curriculum with Teaching Strategies Gold in their learning environment and was accredited through the National Association for the Education of Young Children. This facility utilized the online assessment components of Creative Curriculum and endorsed the use of the Second Step Curriculum as an addition

to the base curriculum. Second step is an anti-bullying curriculum that teaches children to respect everyone as individuals. The facility has been in operation since 1996. The administration at this site was completing a Birth-Kindergarten degree at the time of the study and had 17 years experience in early childhood environments.

Participants

The participants for the study were selected using theoretical sampling, which is a process of selecting individuals based on their theoretical relevance to the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A theory is generated as the themes emerge from studying a group; collecting and coding data; and analyzing the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to Currie (2009), in the early stages of selection, “the researcher begins with the conscious selection of certain subjects who can readily articulate their experience of the area under investigation” (p. 25). As the research progresses, specific participants become the focus of investigation based on “emerging theoretical concepts” (Currie, 2009, p. 25).

Sample Size

The sampling size is suggested to be small to enable the researcher to build rapport with the participants and to be able to collect rich data to be analyzed with more depth (Glaser, 1998). According to Pilnick and Swift (2010), qualitative studies are often designed to be small sample sizes and single-site focused. The participants were chosen carefully for their specific lack of prior knowledge of action research and their willingness to participate in professional development, which limited the sample size. Their lack of knowledge of action research was important to gain understanding about

possible misconceptions about action research. Their willingness to participate was essential due to the nature of the research and use of qualitative methods for data collection. Unwilling participants would only yield a narrow view of the topic without attempting application.

Smaller engaged samples with more limited data does not pose a problem in grounded theory studies due to the aim of the method in developing conceptual categories and identifying relationships between those categories (Charmaz, 2006). Guskey and Kwang Suk (2009) contribute a similar view stating, “implementation of any new professional development strategy should always begin small-scale” (p. 498). This allows for closer examination to compare progress (Guskey & Kwang Suk, 2009). A smaller sample size also supports theoretical saturation in emerging categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Based on their theoretical relevance, 12 participants were selected for this study.

Theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation is the aim for data collection. Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe saturation as the point during research that gathering more data in a category will cease to yield any further insight into that category. It is at this point in grounded theory research that data collection ends for that category; otherwise the researcher is simply collecting useless data that will decelerate the process (Charmaz, 2006). Selecting participants based on theoretical relevance ensured that data collection was clear and unhindered rather than a “waste of time” due to the over collection of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 52).

Selection

For the purpose of selecting participants with theoretical relevance and to aim toward theoretical saturation, there were 12 participants selected for this grounded theory study. The participants were selected from the two early childhood learning facilities described previously, based on their theoretical relevance to the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Minimizing the differences among the participants increases the possibility to collect similar data in categories. According to Glaser & Strauss (1967), the goal of data collection in grounded theory is to be “an active sampler of theoretically relevant data” and “not an ethnographer trying to get the fullest data” (p. 58). For this reason, it was important to select participants for this study who did not have an extensive prior knowledge of action research and who were responsible for planning in their classroom. This kept the data collection focused and relevant for the purpose of reaching theoretical saturation. Therefore, lead teachers were selected for the study due to their responsibility for the curriculum in the classroom and their ability to implement action research in the classroom.

Site one participants. At site one, there were nine teachers who worked with children ages infants through school-age. There were six teachers who were responsible for planning the curriculum for children ages two-five years old. These six teachers were the focus of the study. Out of the six participants, five had an Associates degree or higher. The other participant had at least 18 hours in Early Childhood Education. As part of the selection criteria all participants were selected based on their openness to professional development opportunities, but never having engaged in action research.

Participants needed to have complete involvement in planning for their classroom and have the ability to make positive changes in the learning environment. The participants at this site ranged in ages 23-62 years old (see Table 1 for overview of general participant characteristics).

Table 1

Site One Participants

| Participant # | Age of Participant | Ethnicity of Participant | Highest Degree Earned | Years Teaching | Age of Children Taught During Study |
|---------------|--------------------|--------------------------|--|----------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | 62 Years Old | African-American | Birth-Kindergarten B.A. Degree | 5 | 4 Year Olds |
| 2 | 24 Years Old | Caucasian | 2 Year A.A.S. Degree in Early Childhood | 3 | 3 Year Olds |
| 3 | 49 Years Old | African-American | 2 Year A.A.S. Degree in Early Childhood | 5 | 3 Year Olds |
| 4 | 37 Years Old | Caucasian | 2 Year A.A.S. Degree in Early Childhood | 3 | 2 Year Olds |
| 5 | 23 Years Old | Hispanic | 18 Credit Hours in Early Childhood | 1.8 | 3 Year Olds |
| 6 | 34 Years Old | African-American | Birth-Kindergarten B. A. Degree | 4.6 | 4 Year Olds |

Site two participants. Site two was approximately three times the size of the first facility. At site two, there were 28 teachers on staff working with children ages infants-four. There were 12 teachers responsible for directly planning instruction for the children. Out of those 12 teachers, 11 had an Associates degree or higher. The other participant had at least 18 hours in Early Childhood Education. Based on information from the on-site curriculum coordinator, there were six individuals who worked in comparable environments to the other site and had a classroom that was conducive to implementing action research. Some classrooms were considered non-conducive based on special circumstances such as half-day classrooms; a teacher who would be transitioning to a new job within the timeframe of the study; and classrooms that were considered mostly focused on serving a larger number of children with exceptionalities. Based on the recommendations of the Curriculum Coordinator, six individuals were identified as not having prior knowledge of action research; as being responsible for most of the classroom planning; and as being open to new professional development ideas. The six participants ranged in ages 26-59 years old. There were varying levels of education among the participants ranging from completion of an Associates degree in Early Childhood to completion of a Birth-Kindergarten Bachelors degree (see Table 2 for overview of general participant characteristics).

Table 2

Site Two Participants

| Participant # | Age of Participant | Ethnicity of Participant | Highest Degree Earned | Years Teaching | Age of Children Taught During Study |
|---------------|--------------------|--------------------------|--|----------------|-------------------------------------|
| 7 | 29 Years Old | Caucasian | Birth-Kindergarten B.A. Degree | 5 | 4 Year Olds |
| 8 | 30 Years Old | Asian | Birth-Kindergarten B.A. Degree | 4.5 | 4 Year Olds |
| 9 | 26 Years Old | Hispanic | 2 Year A.A.S. Degree in Early Childhood | 3.7 | 3 Year Olds |
| 10 | 31 Years Old | Caucasian | 2 Year A.A.S. Degree in Early Childhood | 5.5 | 2 Year Olds |
| 11 | 59 Years Old | African-American | 2 Year A.A.S. Degree in Early Childhood | 2 | 2 Year Olds |
| 12 | 38 Years Old | Caucasian | Birth-Kindergarten B. A. Degree | 5.3 | 4 Year Olds |

Participant education, training and experience. All participants had at least one year of experience in the education field, but had less than six years in the classroom. This established a homogeneous group for the purposes of the study. It was important to have a homogeneous group to identify what concepts emerged in a similar grouping (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In addition, the teachers at each site had a similar level of knowledge from their degree programs; however, they had varying levels of training beyond the degree since it was imperative for them to engage in ongoing professional development to stay current in the field of education.

Each site participates in ongoing professional development activities based on the requirements from the state licensing agencies through the Division of Child Development. Early childhood professionals are required to log approximately ten hours of training each year. As an approved trainer for early childhood professionals, I was able to administer training for the Division of Child Development for continuing education credit. I had submitted a training outline (Appendix A) to the Division of Child Development based on implementing action research in the early childhood environment. The document provides an overview of what has been approved as an outline for training. I introduced this brief training on action research prior to the participants implementing action research in their classrooms since they had not been previously exposed to the topic. This served two purposes; to ensure all of the participants had the benefit of the same information going into the research and as a benefit for the site participants in satisfying a portion of the hours needed for their annual training. Providing the training

needed for annual compliance ensured participants were willing to fully participate in the professional development.

Role of Researcher

In approaching the study of professional development, my own philosophical assumptions began with the question of the interpretation of my own ideas about professional development and active research. Having engaged in action research, I brought knowledge of the benefits and obstacles to engaging in action research in the classroom. Specifically, in relation to action research, my bias toward that topic leans toward believing it can be a viable choice for professional development in any education setting if it is implemented fully by educators and supported by administrators. In relation to early childhood environments, I have had exposure to a variety of early childhood settings and believe that action research could be a catalyst for more meaningful professional development. However, now that I have conducted research in the area of teacher perceptions, I realize that the success of any professional development method relies on the perceptions and motivations of the educators (Meister, 2010). This new understanding has diminished my earlier thoughts that action research would be successful in any setting. Those biases on the topic were explored through an ongoing personal journal during the process of implementation. The journal was in an electronic format to promote the flow of ideas and for the convenience of documenting. The journal (Appendix B) reveals these sentiments and provides ongoing documentation of ideas.

During the study, I was in a position as a faculty member at a private college in the Teacher Education Department. In addition to that work, I was a Doctoral Student

seeking a degree in the area of Curriculum and Instruction. In the faculty position, I was responsible for providing a high quality learning environment for the purpose of training future teachers in the Teacher Education Program. Professional development had become one of my points of interest due to the connection between professional training and quality teaching (Malm, 2009).

In relation to this study, my role during data collection was a participant observer. According to Glesne (2011), this role is defined as a researcher who remains primarily as an observer, but has some interaction with the study participants. I participated in the learning environment as a facilitator to guide the participants in utilizing and understanding action research as they had questions. The purpose of my presence was as a support to the participants if they had questions about the process. This is similar to training while on the job. This allowed the participants to ask questions and allowed me to interject ideas when an opportunity would arise in the classroom.

Due to the nature of the classroom setting, conversations were limited. For that reason, the majority of data collection came from journal entries and scheduled interviews. In a similar research study, Jones (2009) reinforced observation to be utilized to gain a greater understanding of the environment being studied rather than for data collection. In this study, observation was used to verify the progress of the participants in relation to the implementation of action research in the classroom.

After the brief initial training, participants had questions and my presence in the classroom assisted them in getting started with the process; however as they demonstrated comprehension of the topic I moved into more of an observation role. The

purpose of taking on more of an observation role was to allow time to record and analyze the process of implementing action research along with understanding the environment of the participants. Being part of the research environment required me to document biases in an ongoing personal journal during the progression of the research. However, being onsite allowed me a greater opportunity to schedule interviews at the convenience of the participants to identify perceptions that emerged during the implementation process. Being emerged in the environment on a consistent basis allowed me to be available to answer questions in the classroom related to action research during implementation. I did not participate directly in the actual research projects in the classroom.

During data analysis, my role shifted from observer to human as instrument. A role identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the human as an instrument in research is described as the researcher being able to be more responsive and flexible during qualitative research to understand the phenomenon being studied based on the perspective of the participants. In this study, the perceptions of the participants had changed rapidly and being present in the environment gave me a better perspective and understanding of what caused the rapid changes for analysis.

Training

As the researcher, I provided specific training to the participants based on my experience and training in the area of action research. As a certified trainer through The Division of Child Development, I was able to provide training in action research for teachers to earn renewal credit for their license. I have conducted similar training in action research in other school systems for elementary level educators. The training

provided to the school system was in the form of a brief overview of action research as a topic and then primarily as a consultant in the classroom as the teachers administered action research methods. A similar method was employed when training students seeking teacher licensure.

For the purposes of this study, training took place after completing the initial semi-structured interviews (Appendix C). The training lasted for approximately one hour and was implemented at each site during a time that was convenient for each group of participants. Training included handouts with discussion, power point presentations, research articles about the topic, and follow-up technical assistance in the classroom when a question would surface. Treatment fidelity was ensured in the study by providing the same training for each participant, utilizing handouts to measure skill progress, and maintaining skill progress through daily technical assistance and observation.

Handouts and Discussion

Participants were provided a training handout that I created of an overview of action research (Appendix A). Handout 1 was provided simply as a reminder of the initial items reviewed during the training and served as an introduction to the topic. The handout also contained guiding questions for the journal entries, so participants were instructed to keep the handout accessible for later review. Participants received an additional handout I created (Handout 2- Appendix D) that guided their process in the classroom and assisted with treatment fidelity. Handout 2 was a guide in the simplest format possible for quick reference about the process of implementing action research in the classroom. This also served as an informal assessment during the implementation of

action research as the participants were instructed to record their progress utilizing the handout and journals. Journals were provided to be available in the classroom, which allowed a quick glance at the progress. During the training, participants were collectively brainstorming ideas for exploration and began completing the handout. This ensured that participants had grasped the ideas of action research and had simultaneously started the process.

Power Point Presentations

During the training, a power point was presented containing two examples of action research being implemented in the classroom. The presentations provided a visual of completed projects in the same format as the guide noted as Handout 2. This gave the participants a visual of a completed project to assist in initiating possible ideas for their own classroom projects. Print outs of these power point presentations are provided in Appendix E for reference.

Research Articles

Two research articles (Appendix F) were provided that were located during the review of literature and that were specific to action research in the classroom. Research was limited in the area of early childhood environments and the articles do not cover the full focus of inquiry in this study. However, they do serve as practitioner friendly examples of what action research looks like in the classroom setting as an initial guide to the process. These articles were provided, with permission, in hard copy for the participants to take with them from the training and they were instructed to read the articles to gain even more clarity about the process. Participants were also instructed to

record their overall understanding of the article information and how they felt they could apply the information in their own classroom. Participants were reminded to record this information in their journals when I visited their classrooms.

Technical Assistance

After the group trainings were completed, the participants were asked to begin implementing action research in their classrooms based on their initial selected topics during the brainstorming session of the training. Technical assistance was provided in the classroom on a daily basis during the data collection phase. Visits were not scheduled to allow for flexibility, but they took place during each day of operation over approximately a two-month period of time for 15 to 30 minutes in each classroom. I visited the classrooms during active times in the early childhood environments between the hours of 7:00am-12:00pm and 3:00pm-6:00pm. Participants were able to ask questions during these visits if they needed clarification or assistance.

Data Collection

A variety of methods for data collection were utilized to gain a broader understanding of the professional development process. In the grounded theory approach, the participants describe their experiences with a particular phenomenon to help provide a framework for further research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory methods of collection utilize a constant comparative method of data analysis to connect with emerging themes while discovering the new theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser & Hon, 2012). Participants approach existing problems in a new way from their own

perspective. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and journals to gain a broader understanding of the process taking place during the study.

Interviews

Interviews can yield rich and relevant data if the questions are grounded in the literature of the study topic and purposefully organized using an interview protocol (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). An interview protocol is particularly helpful for researchers with limited experience in data collection (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The interview protocol, located in Appendix G, outlines the steps initiated for this study to validate the interview questions and organize the process of interviewing to elicit useful data. The questions were provided for a colleague to review and they were also piloted with a group of educators from a different county who would not be part of the participant group in this study. Based on their recommendations, some questions were reworded for clarity to produce the final set of questions located in Appendix C, Appendix H and Appendix I.

For the purpose of this study, interviews were in three different formats-(a) Semi-Structured Face-to-Face Interview; (b) Open-ended, Face-to-Face Interview; (c) Focus Group Interview. The purpose of the interview is to collect information that is not directly observable such as feelings and perceptions (Hüseyin, 2009). According to Jones (2009), the interviews will be where most of the data will be collected related to the experiences and perceptions since this type of data relies on the direct information from the participant. The interviews took place at varying times during the study (Table 3).

Table 3

Timing of Each Type of Interview Administered During the Study

| Site | Date of Initial, Semi-Structured Interview (Prior to Training) | Date of Open-Ended, Follow-Up Interview (During Implementation of Action Research) | Date of Focus Group Interview (After Implementation of Action Research) |
|------|--|--|---|
| One | 3/13/14 | 3/28/14 | 5/6/14 |
| Two | 3/12/14 | 3/26/14 | 5/7/14 |

Semi-structured format. Initial data collection involved interviewing each participant, using the semi-structured format located in Appendix C, to identify any preconceived ideas about action research or professional development. In grounded theory, the interviews are a way to collect “narration on-site and formulate narrative constructs” of the participants (Szeto, 2010, p. 80). The interview method is suitable to collect the views of the participants to analyze, code and then eventually form new theory along with other data collection methods (Szeto, 2010). Initial interviews took place at the beginning of the study, prior to the initial training on action research, and were during a time and place that was convenient for the participant (Podvey, Hinojosa, & Koenig, 2010).

Questions are based on the guiding research questions (Glesne, 2011). The initial, semi-structured interview (Table 4) in this study was designed to first gain some general information to identify characteristics and demographics (Questions 1-2). The second focus of the interview is to identify preconceived ideas about professional development and action research (Questions 3-13). In the literature review, action research was noted

as not just a method of research. It was rather a continual format for professional development in the education field. Teachers become more engaged in their own professional development, which leads to higher levels of satisfaction (West, 2011). The interview questions in the initial, semi-structured format were used specifically to gain insight to answer sub-question 1: How do educators perceive action research prior to implementing in an early childhood environment?

Table 4

Semi-Structured, Face-to-Face Interview Questions (Initial Interview Prior to Training)

1. Tell me about your background.
 - Family (General information- nothing specific)
 - Education
 - Work Experiences
2. Tell me what led you to work with young children?
3. What is your first thought when you hear the words “professional development?”
4. What types of professional development have you participated in?
Examples-workshops, conferences, online training, etc.
5. Describe some of those experiences.
6. Are there types of professional development in which you are drawn to participate? Why do you feel that way?
7. Describe a professional development experience in which you felt it was a waste of time and did not learn a significant amount through the experience.
8. Describe a professional development experience in which you felt you learned a significant amount through the experience.
9. Describe what would make professional development more appealing to you.
10. What do you know about action research? Describe.
11. What are your first thoughts when you hear the words “action research”?
12. What thoughts or concerns would you have about implementing action research in your classroom?

13. When it comes to professional development, realistically what amount of time are you willing to devote to training and development outside your normal work hours?

Note. This table lists the questions that were included in the initial interview with each participant prior to the beginning of the study.

Training implemented. Once the initial interviews were complete and coded, the participants received on-site training and an overview related to action research. This training was necessary because the participants had been specifically selected due to their lack of prior knowledge about action research. The training overview was in the format of informational handouts (Appendix A; Appendix D) research articles (Appendix F) and demonstration slide presentations of action research projects being implemented in early childhood environments (Appendix E). This allowed the participants to see an example of action research in the implementation stage.

Ongoing assistance was provided as a follow-up to the training through classroom modeling and one-on-one conferences to assist in the identification of classroom issues. Additional literature was provided to the participants in the form of peer-reviewed journal articles (Appendix F) to enable them to gain additional knowledge through self-study. The participant's understanding of the article information was recorded in their journals and discussed during one of the classroom visits. Training was offered at no charge at the beginning of the research phase and at a convenient time for each site. The purpose of the training was to introduce the topic of action research to participants to initiate the implementation of action research in the early childhood environments.

Open-ended format. After training was complete, participants identified areas for investigation to implement action research in their classroom environments. I was present in the classrooms at this point in the research phase and assisted the participants as questions would arise. During the process of implementation of action research in the classroom, each participant was interviewed again to gain insight about the process they were experiencing (Hüseyin, 2009). This format was an open-ended format, as seen in Appendix H, to allow for participants to describe their feelings, beliefs and full experiences during the process (Szeto, 2010). Questions were focused on the actual process and concerns or developments they were experiencing related to action research as a professional development method. Perceptions about collaboration were also a focus for the early childhood educators in this interview.

The questions continue to be based on the guiding research questions (Glesne, 2011). Collaborative environments were cited in the literature review as one of the main reasons educators continued with more demanding models of professional development and led to sustaining involvement beyond the required timeline (O'Mara & Gutierrez, 2010). The second interview focuses on collaboration while implementing action research.

The open-ended, follow-up interview in this study (Table 5) was designed to be more flexible to allow follow-up questions to emerge during the process of the study (Szeto, 2010). The open-ended, follow-up interview took place during the implementation of action research in the classroom. This interview began to work toward answering the central question of the research: How does the process of utilizing action

research influence the professional development of early childhood educators as it relates to their professional practices? Supporting the central question, the beginning of the interview focuses on the process of utilizing action research and how educators perceive that process (Questions 1-4). The next questions are focused on gaining insight to answer sub-question 2: How do educators perceive collaboration during the process of implementing action research in an early childhood environment? (Questions 5-10). During this interview, I used the phrase “tell me more” to probe the participants to continue to share more about their perceptions during the process of implementing action research and about collaboration. The probing technique is utilized by qualitative researchers to work toward theoretical saturation in a specific topic (Glesne, 2011).

Table 5

Open-Ended Interview Questions (Follow-Up Questions During Implementation)

1. Describe the process of implementing action research in your classroom.
2. What are some of the challenges you are facing during this process?
3. What are your thoughts about your ability to conduct research in your classroom?
4. Describe how you see yourself as a researcher. Has that changed through this process?
5. Describe any interactions you have had with your colleagues in relation to action research.
6. What opportunities have you had to collaborate with colleagues that were not specifically related to action research?
7. What setting or situation has been conducive for collaboration with your colleagues? Describe what made it more conducive.
8. In relation to collaboration, describe the positive aspects of collaborating with your colleagues.
9. In relation to collaboration, describe some “not so positive” aspects of collaborating with your colleagues.
10. In your opinion, has collaboration been helpful in implementing action research in your classroom? Why or why not?

Note. This table lists the questions included in the open-ended interview administered with the participants during the implementation phase of action research.

Focus group format. A focus group (Appendix I) concluded the interview data collection. This interview took place after the action research had been implemented to

determine how the participants perceived the effectiveness of action research as a professional development method. A focus group format was purposely chosen to initiate a more collaborative setting for the exchange of ideas (Hüseyin, 2009). As part of the initial research, professional learning communities were suggested as a strategy to promote collaboration (Berry et al., 2007.) This was not the primary focus of this study, but the process could lead to future opportunities for professional learning communities.

This final focus group interview identified if action research would be a viable method for future development among the participants (Table 6). Malm (2009) acknowledged the importance of involving educators in the process of choosing professional development to identify specific needs of the educators involved in the process of leading to quality training. Each question was designed to promote further discussion within the group about their role in professional development (Questions 1-9). Since the participants were implementing action research at the time of this interview, it promoted a broader discussion of the topic and the participants were more at ease to share their experiences. Questions 1 and 9 in the focus group format were designed to answer sub-question 3: What is the perceived value, by the participants, of implementing action research as a professional development method? Questions 2, 3, and 4 were designed to address any reservations the participants had about the process to assist with future implementation. Questions 5 and 6 addressed any changes the participants noticed due to the implementation of action research. Questions 7 and 8 were focused on professional development to see if a significant change in preference occurred since the initial interview. Each site was interviewed separately.

Table 6

Focus Group Interview Questions

-
1. In relation to action research, how do you perceive this method and its use in your classroom?
 2. What reservations did you have going into the process of implementing action research that now are no longer a reservation?
 3. What reservations did you have going into the process of implementing action research that are still present? Why do think they are still concerns?
 4. If reservations are still present... what do you feel would minimize those reservations?
 5. What changes did you make to your environment that was directly related to action research or the collaborative process?
 6. Describe the areas where you see significant change in your in your professional practices.
 7. In relation to professional development, do you have a preference in types of professional development? If so, what types?
 8. Describe what you think about when you hear the words “professional development” now.
 9. Now that you have implemented action research in your classroom, how do you see yourself utilizing this type of professional development in the future?

Note. This table includes the list of questions for the focus group interview that took place at the end of the study.

Observations and Technical Assistance

In-class observations took place daily, with the exclusion of Saturday and Sunday, for a period of approximately two months to analyze the progression of the action research. Observations in the classrooms were conducted in the morning between 7:00am

and 12:00pm and in the afternoon between 3:00pm and 6:00pm due to the majority of the academic program being scheduled during those times in the early childhood environments.

Observations were unscheduled to allow for flexibility, but classrooms were visited each day during the research phase to observe progress, build rapport, and offer technical assistance. Field notes were taken specifically before action research was administered, during the implementation, and after the action research had been administered to gain insights from the participants' personal experiences.

Observations in the classroom were organized and similar among different classrooms by utilizing an observation protocol as seen in Appendix J. By using this format, the collected information was organized in a similar context to simplify data analysis. The observation data and technical assistance was recorded by typing notes on a laptop, using the observation protocol as a template, to expedite the process and to enable the recording of a large amount of information quickly. These notes served as a reminder of the continual progress in the classroom rather than actual data about the perceptions and experiences of the participants. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), observations can be utilized to collect information about perceptions, but are more useful in revealing subtle environmental descriptions. The primary purpose of the classroom observation became to provide technical assistance, which was recorded on the observation template.

The purpose for utilizing ongoing observations is to establish rapport with the participants and to observe and document in a less conspicuous manner to minimize the chances of participants disguising their true feelings and actions (Drury, Homewood, &

Randall, 2010). Observations were informal and for assistance purposes. Podvey, Hinojosa and Koenig (2010) describe the observations as an opportunity to record “behaviors and impressions” of the participants during every aspect of the research process (p. 179). The observation protocol was utilized to guide the observation in the classrooms (Appendix J). This protocol was distributed to each site during training to inform them of what would be taking place during the study.

Journals

Participants were instructed to keep journals throughout the process of the study. At least three entries per week were required, so the participants did not become overburdened; however participants were not discouraged from reflecting more often. The purpose for the journal was to encourage participants to elaborate on ideas they may not have thought of during the interviews. As the study progressed and participants gained a clearer understanding of the process, some of their ideas changed since the previous interview. For this reason, the journal ensured the participant had the opportunity to fully express their thoughts and perceptions during the process (Drury, Homewood, & Randall, 2001). Participants were instructed to reflect on their feelings about action research as professional development, collaboration, and their experiences in the classroom related to action research. A guide (Table 7) was provided, with the training materials at the end of Appendix A, to assist participants in their journal writing. Participants kept written notes in the journals about experiences while in the classroom. I collected the journals from the participants for transcription after the implementation of action research in the classrooms.

Table 7

Guiding Questions for Journal Entries

These questions will assist you in getting started with your journal entries:

- What are some of your hesitations about implementing action research?
- Describe areas that you still do not fully understand when it comes to implementing action research in your classroom.
- Describe some of your challenges with implementing action research.
- Describe any breakthroughs or successes you are experiencing during the process of implementing action research.
- Record any changes you see in your classroom or professional practices during the process of implementing action research.
- Discuss what makes the implementation of action research easier as you progress.

Note. This table includes the questions offered to the participants as a guide for their journal entries during the implementation phase of the study.

Data Analysis

Sources of Data Collection

There were three types of data collected during this study, interviews, observations, and journals. The interviews were conducted at various times throughout the process. The initial, semi-structured interview was administered prior to training or implementation of action research in the classroom. The follow-up, open-ended interview

was administered after training and in the middle of the implementation phase of action research in the classroom. The focus group interview was conducted near the end of the study after the implementation was complete in the classrooms. The grounded theory method of analysis was utilized to decipher the information collected from the transcribed interviews by using open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The interview data provided the majority of the information utilized in creating the model used to describe the process of utilizing action research in the early childhood environment. Classroom observations and journal entries provided additional insight into the process and assisted in clarifying the codes and categories during the analysis. The most significant categories were identified and utilized to create a model for professional development to be utilized in early childhood environments.

Data Analysis Techniques

After collecting data in the early childhood environment, engaging in a process of summarizing the data for understanding was the next phase. In grounded theory design, the researcher is immersed in the systematic study of the process and this immersion produces a significant amount of qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is at this point that one of the most important steps in the process occurs- the analysis. The analysis of the data transforms the profusion of descriptive data into an understandable explanation (Mills, 2011). The following qualitative data analysis techniques were executed in this systematic grounded theory study.

Describing. The data were analyzed by describing the experiences of the educators related to action research and the perceptions of the educators during the

process. There was a small sample size, 12 participants, which were selected due to their theoretical relevance to the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The small sample size is supported by research when implementing a qualitative design (Bore, 2006). Participants are described individually in Chapter 4 discussing their education levels, teaching experiences, age of children taught, and perceptions of action research based on the initial interview. This process of describing each individual allowed me to clearly identify the individual differences between the participants and their individual experiences related to the study (Mills, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Descriptions are meant to provide a basis for disseminating categories to identify emerging themes (Glesne, 2011).

Reading/ Memoing. Another data analysis strategy was reading through text collected through interviews, making margin notes, and forming initial codes (Mills, 2011; Straus & Corbin, 1990). After transcribing the interviews, I made margin notes when reading back through the interview notes to identify themes. This process allowed me to identify themes that emerged during the study. Memoing is a continual process to develop ideas on emerging categories (Glaser, 2004). Memo writing “provides an immediate illustration for an idea” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.108). These illustrations can be used as a quick reminder of a concept at a later time. With notes being available at a later time, it allowed me to focus on facial expressions and other body cues during the actual interview. It also helped to build rapport in the environment (Charmaz, 2006). Memo writing was also in the form of the journal recording researcher bias. This gave me freedom to take unconnected notes during observations without the distraction of losing information for later analysis (Glesne, 2001).

Classifying. I used the constant comparative method to classify, to analyze, and to identify emerging themes and patterns within the data. The information collected was compared to emerging categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), the constant comparative method requires only the saturation of data rather than the consideration of all the data. Coding is the process employed during a grounded theory study to classify the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Open coding. Open coding identified major categories in the initial data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998) describe open coding, sometimes referred to as initial coding (Charmaz, 2006), as taking data and segmenting the information into categories.

Similar to open coding, in vivo coding refers to codes that are created specifically from a participant's meaning or experience. In vivo codes are terms used to describe meanings of concepts in an effort to stay as close to the participants' meaning as possible (Charmaz, 2006). This type of coding makes categories more relevant to the environment and participants. During the interview, these are the words or phrases used by the participant to describe an experience. These words and phrases are then turned into codes for emerging categories (Charmaz, 2006). When asked to describe her first thoughts about action research in the initial interview, Wanda said her thought was "I was back in school." This phrase captured the true meaning of what she was saying and "Back in School" became one of the in vivo codes. Wanda also described how she felt about the process of implementing action research during the final focus group interview. She said, "I feel strong" as she described her thoughts about utilizing action research as a

professional development method in the future. That sentiment, “I Feel Strong”, became another in vivo code used in the open coding process. In addition, Jackie expressed being impressed with herself when asked about the process of implementing action research. Her description, “Impressed With Myself” became an additional in vivo code because it captured the essence of what she was feeling.

The goal of coding is to reduce the number of categories and identify the overall major themes in the study. An initial list of open codes was created based on the memos from the interviews, observations, and journals (Appendix K). For further organization, the codes were separated by research question to begin formulating specific answers to the questions guiding the research (Appendix L). Once the initial themes emerge through open coding and in vivo coding, the next step is axial coding which identifies the core focus.

Axial coding. Axial coding provided a frame to organize the data into subcategories to show a relationship (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). This visual frame provided a structure for the research to promote less ambiguity (Charmaz, 2006). A diagram was created as patterns emerged to serve as a tool for comparison between the different categories (Appendix M). This diagram as a display tool made it easier to see the relationship between the categories. This process allowed me to clearly identify similarities and differences between the emerging themes. Headings naming the emerging categories were added after organizing the initial concepts from the open coding process into similar relationship categories. This diagram made it easier to see the relationship between the concepts. This allowed me to clearly recognize similarities and

differences between the emerging themes in the categories and enabled me to combine or eliminate codes that were not needed. The newly defined categories that emerged during the comparison of relationships were organized utilizing an excel spreadsheet to organize information collected from the participants. The excel program allowed for the creation of new pages that could be easily accessed utilizing the tabs at the bottom of the page. Initially being called sheets, the tabs could be renamed to correspond with the category title. This made organizing the information easier to access without opening and closing different documents. After organizing the codes by relationship, the final step was using selective coding which allowed me to develop propositions to lead to the development of the new model (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998).

Selective coding. During this final phase of coding, the interrelationship of the categories are described in a narrative form to articulate the process of the study and to develop the categories into a format to be utilized for the creation of new theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). Selective coding is the process of telling the story revealed by the data. Coding and the organization of data is one step in the process of analyzing the data. However, the coding is only the beginning point to look for patterns and eventually create learning models (Glesne, 2011). A visual model is created once the data has been collected to explain the connections between categories and to describe how the process of implementing action research influenced the professional development of the early childhood educators (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The visual model is in the form of a graphic that relates to the connection of data and the formulation of new theory based on data. This model is discussed in depth in Chapter 4.

Interpreting. The final strategy used to analyze data was to use direct interpretation to look at single instances and draw meaning from them. The process involved pulling the information apart and reconstructing it into a more meaningful format (Nikander, 2008). This is where, as the researcher, I became more a part of the process based on experiences and biases to guide the interpretation. This strategy allowed me to develop naturalistic generalizations from analyzing the data and presenting the information so that it can be applied in other settings.

Significant Categories Emerge

During the data collection, a systematic approach was utilized to develop a set of categories to begin developing theory grounded in the data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe the process of discovering theory as one that creates categories from the research evidence to form new emergent concepts. This study focused on the process of implementing action research in the classroom and the perspectives of the participants before, during and after implementation. Their perspectives of the process led to the formation of new ideas about implementing action research as a professional development model.

After reading through the data several times, memos were created to begin labeling tentative categories. Meaning began to emerge from the data through the participants' words. In vivo coding was used when a concept was best described using the participant's exact words. Charts were created to organize the data to assist with the constant comparative method to classify, analyze and identify emerging themes and patterns grounded in the data. These open code charts (Appendix L) provided

organization to the data to allow for comparison. Data were then summarized in larger categories to prepare for the process of axial coding. During axial coding, relationships were identified among the open codes to narrow down connections between the ideas (Appendix N). A diagram was created to show the process of combining and eliminating categories to form sub-categories (Appendix M). Core categories were established during selective coding and led to the creation of four main influences that represented a change in professional practices among the participants. During the open coding process, the following significant categories emerged from the data (Table 8):

Table 8

Open Codes

| | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Time-Consuming | Helpful | Positive Anticipation |
| Increased Workload | Reflective | Enjoys Learning New Things |
| “Back in School” | Acquired Knowledge | Collaboration |
| Difficult | Able to Apply Knowledge | Empowerment |
| Process | Having Support | Teacher as Researcher |
| Sharing Information | Distribution of Work | Community |
| Gaining Assistance | Sharing Resources | Irritating People |
| Time Limitations | Confidence | Feeling in Control |
| Self-Centered Behaviors | “Impressed With Myself” | Not as Isolated |
| Distractions | Not as Difficult | Confident in the Process |
| Support With Questions | Resourceful | Not as Time-Consuming |
| Support Through Similar Situations | “I Feel Strong” | Relationships |
| Support Through Ideas | Help Myself | Thinking |
| Support Through Information | Finding Answers | |
| Ideas Based on Research | Change of Attitude | |

During the axial coding phase, the categories that were identified during open coding were analyzed to make meaningful connections. The analysis of the interviews along with the observations and journals provided information that revealed relationships between some categories and caused other categories to become insignificant. Relationships between the categories were established to narrow the focus to the following sub-categories:

- Reflecting on Practices
- Confidence and Initiative
- Seeking Out Resources
- Sharing Information With Others

During the selective coding phase, the core concepts were identified and utilized in creating the *action to influence professional development model* (Figure 2). The core concepts that were grounded in the data collection became the main influences on the professional practices of the participants. The core concepts that emerged during data collection are the following:

- Metacognition
- Empowerment
- Resourcefulness
- Collaboration

These concepts serve as part of the answer to the following central question that relates to influences on practices: How does the process of utilizing action research influence the professional development of early childhood educators as it relates to their

professional practices? The action to influence professional development model (Figure 2) represents the overall process of implementing action research and the influences on the professional practices of the participants. It serves to provide a basis for utilizing action research for future professional development opportunities.

Trustworthiness

As a contributor to the educational field, a researcher needs to ensure a study is trustworthy and will contribute meaningful insight for further research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although it is essential to validate the research in a qualitative study, the terminology has not always been agreed upon between researchers (Lewis, 2009). Some use the term validity, which is more closely related to quantitative methods. Some researchers with a more constructivist view prefer the term “truthfulness” (Lewis, 2009, p. 13). Securing reliability of the data is necessary to provide credibility of the research design. According to Lewis (2009), reliability traditionally “refers to whether a particular research technique will yield the same results if applied repeatedly to the same object” (p. 7). Due to the different model designs of qualitative research, this definition is more easily applied to quantitative research. However, qualitative researchers can enhance the reliability of their research methods by using a variety of data collection techniques and accurately analyzing the data (Lewis, 2009).

Regardless of the terms utilized when describing the process of authenticating and testing the credibility of qualitative research, the outcome should be the same with the truthfulness of the research being validated. Credibility can be enhanced by demonstrating integrity in data collection; competence in analyzing data and

demonstrating the legitimacy of the research methods (Ha, 2011). By utilizing methods aligned with qualitative research, the researcher can gain a greater understanding of the meaning created by the participants' experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To contribute to a higher level of trustworthiness in this study, I utilized the following principles: (a) credibility, (b) dependability, (c) transferability, and (d) confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The principles guided the study to ensure consistent methods and accurate representation of the participants.

Credibility

Much like validity in quantitative research, credibility represents an accurate description or interpretation of an experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, strategies used to establish credibility were peer debriefing and member checking.

Peer debriefing. A peer debriefer keeps the research in check and asks hard questions about methods, meanings and interpretations. In this study, the peer debriefer was one of my colleagues who understood early childhood environments and action research. The peer debriefer has earned a doctorate in the area of Curriculum and Instruction and possessed a Birth-Kindergarten license. The peer debriefer examined the categories as they emerged during data collection. This was important because the debriefer can keep the researcher on track and assist with any ambiguity in the writing (Mills, 2011). Debriefing sessions were scheduled after each interview was administered to assist with coding. As an external reflection tool, written accounts were kept during the peer debriefing sessions and notes about changes that occurred were recorded (Glesne, 2011).

Member checking. By continually sharing the interview transcripts, analytical thoughts and summarizations with the participants, the researcher can ensure the ideas are being represented accurately (Glesne, 2011). For this validation strategy, the focus groups were utilized by the participants as a time to review information in the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). The transcribed notes were distributed to each participant prior to the final interview to refresh their memory of the previous interviews and as a way for them to check the accuracy of the information. During the analysis, participants could identify if areas were missing or being misrepresented (Mills, 2011).

Dependability

Dependability occurs when another researcher can identify the consistency of the research in a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the strategies utilized to establish dependability were peer debriefing and triangulation.

Peer debriefing. Since coding was the method utilized for organizing data, the peer debriefer was recruited to examine the categories as they emerged and asked to give input about clarity (Glesne, 2011). The peer debriefer is outside the parameters of the study and can make sure methods are consistent. Frequent sessions were scheduled to ensure data was analyzed in a consistent manner, which kept the study on track.

Triangulation. With triangulation, multiple and different sources and methods are used to provide substantial evidential artifacts. This is important to provide a variety of research sources to validate the findings in the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This study employed data triangulation where different data sources will be utilized to reveal varying aspects of empirical reality. For example, repeated interviews built data and

developed rapport, so I could gain accurate and comprehensive information from participants (Glesne, 2011). In addition, the use of observation assisted me in identifying areas not easily recognized by the participant alone. By corroborating the evidential artifacts, a clearer picture emerged of the underlying themes (Mills, 2011).

Transferability

Transferability refers to the level of applicability of a study to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This enables another researcher to gain a greater understanding in a similar setting by using similar methods described in a previous study (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Transferability occurs when specific and detailed descriptions are used to explain the full process of the study. In this study, the strategy utilized to establish transferability is providing specific detail with dense descriptions and varying sites.

Detailed descriptions. Rich descriptions of the methods used in collecting and analyzing data provides a clear picture of how information was processed. In addition, detailed information about how participants and sites were selected adds another layer of specificity. With detailed descriptions, other researchers can transfer the information to other settings with similar characteristics (Creswell, 2007).

Varying sites. Although a homogeneous group of participants were selected for the study, the site selection was based on varying types of programs. Site one integrated a developmentally appropriate biblically-based curriculum and site two integrated a developmentally appropriate secular-based curriculum. By varying the types of sites with alignment in all other areas, it increases the potential for transferability of findings to a

broader base of programs. In relation to this study, the curriculum content is not as important as the level of flexibility to integrate into the current curriculum model.

Confirmability

Once credibility, dependability and transferability have been achieved, then the study can be confirmed for accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmation can be achieved through clear documentation during data collection and supporting conclusions with unbiased data (Creswell, 2007). In this study, the strategies utilized to establish confirmability were peer debriefing, identification of researcher bias, and attention to reactivity.

Peer debriefing. Since regular debriefing sessions were scheduled throughout the research data collection and analysis, the peer debriefer continually checked for accuracy. The peer debriefer had a clear understanding of early childhood environments and action research and was able to check for accuracy in those areas in addition to the grounded theory data collection methods.

Researcher bias. In a qualitative design, the researcher brings preconceived ideas to the research. I had preconceived ideas about action research and its effectiveness as a professional development method. In order to control the bias, a full-disclosure of thoughts during the process was recorded in the personal journal. The journal entries from the personal journal are discussed thoroughly in the description and purpose of the study and when the data were analyzed, my views were identified. The journal entries were recorded on a laptop for organization and ease of later coding. The personal journal

was a way for me to record my personal reflections and questions throughout the research process to completely reveal any bias (Podvey, Hinojosa & Koenig, 2010).

Reactivity. Accuracy in the study can be affected if participants do not answer interview questions honestly. Participants may be concerned about how they answer interview questions and may want to answer how they think they should answer. This is known as reactivity and can significantly alter the outcome of the study (Lewis, 2009). According to Lewis (2009), it is virtually impossible to eliminate the changes in the environment due to the presence of the researcher or reactivity. However, being aware of the possible effects can allow the researcher to discuss these possibilities during the analysis of data to also increase the dependability or credibility of the study (Lewis, 2009). I explained the purpose of the questions and asked for full disclosure from the participants.

Full disclosure. In order to gain the most open and honest answers, I fully explained the process of the interview and the purposes for the answers to minimize the effects of potential bias. For clarification to the participants, the answers were not going to be used as an evaluation of teaching competency, but merely as information. The honest answers from the participants assisted in recording true experiences and identifying connecting themes (Lewis, 2009).

Ethical Considerations

The Liberty Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study prior to any data collection (Appendix O). This procedure ensured that the participants' rights and confidentiality had been protected during the study and beyond, which is crucial to any

study (Glesne, 2011). The recruitment of participants, research procedures, and data analysis methods were all reviewed to ensure the participants were protected from harm. Participants were informed of all risks and benefits associated with participating in the study prior to the initiation of the study.

In addition, the IRB reviewed procedures to protect the confidentiality of the participants. The proposed procedures identified how participants' identity would be protected, how data would be collected, and how data were stored.

The participants were assigned a number at the beginning of the study. Data collected from the participants were identified by using the assigned number. The final report only identifies the participants by these numbers and a pseudo name for ease of writing.

Data were collected through interviews, observations and journals. Initial interview data were written documentation. The participants' identities were only documented in each of these collection procedures by the assigned numbers. The interviews were transcribed from the written document and then stored on a computer that was password protected. The observation notes were analyzed and classified to be stored on a computer. Memo notes from the journals were documented and stored on a computer. Participant journals were returned to them after notes were verified since they had identifying characteristics.

Data are stored on a computer with a password protection. I am the only individual with access to the computer and the password. During peer debriefings the information was made available by printing documents from the computer data files and

then retrieved after review. The data files will be deleted after the required three-year time period for maintaining data.

Summary

The purpose of this systematic grounded theory study was to gain insight into the process of utilizing action research as a professional development method in an early childhood environment by focusing on the perceptions of the early childhood educators. A grounded theory method was proposed due to its inductive approach to research by immersing oneself in the process of data collection to eventually develop conclusions or theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Jones, 2009).

Grounded theory is a way to analyze the meanings and interpretations of experiences by constantly comparing data until a full understanding of the phenomena occurs (Cooney, 2011). The educators' perceptions of the process provided greater insight into implementing action research as a professional development method. These perceptions can be further utilized to explain how action research can serve as a professional development approach in other early childhood environments in the future.

This chapter discussed the research premise, the grounded theory approach, and how rigor was established through the research design, data collection and analysis procedures. The criterion for selecting both the site and participants was identified along with a description of the on-site training model. Trustworthiness was established by outlining the following principles: (a) credibility, (b) dependability, (c) transferability, and (d) confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The principles were identified as a guide to ensure consistent methods and accurate representation of the participants.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this systematic grounded theory study was to gain insight into the process of utilizing action research as a professional development method in an early childhood environment by focusing on the perceptions of the early childhood educators. The following research questions guided the focus of the study:

Central Research Question: How does the process of utilizing action research influence the professional development of early childhood educators as it relates to their professional practices?

Research Sub-Question 1: How do educators perceive action research prior to implementing in an early childhood environment?

Research Sub-Question 2: How do educators perceive collaboration during the process of implementing action research in an early childhood environment?

Research Sub-Question 3: What is the perceived value, by the participants, of implementing action research as a professional development method?

In this chapter, I provide a description of the participants in this study including their teaching role and experience in education. I present a new model, the action to influence professional development model (Figure 2), based on concepts that emerged during data collection. In addition, I describe data collected during the study to show the phases of change in the participants' perceptions and end the chapter by answering each of the research questions guiding the study.

Descriptions of Participants

The participants in this study represent a broad range of issues in the classroom that could benefit from implementing action research. In addition, participants offered a variety of information related to their perceptions of action research and collaboration to be utilized in formulating a new theory related to professional development. In this section I will describe the educators participating in the study along with their action research topic of choice. Participants were assigned numbers as identification throughout the study, but for purposes of description I have assigned pseudo names for this section.

Site One Participants

Shannon. Shannon has been teaching for five years and has had experience teaching children ages 2-4 years old. Shannon recently completed her Birth-Kindergarten degree and during the time of the study she was teaching four-year olds. Shannon had focused her research efforts toward collaborating with families about sensitive topics. She had a child that had not been diagnosed with Autism, but was showing tendencies. In order to refer the child, Shannon needed the parent's consent and she had met resistance before when bringing up the topic. Shannon's action research topic was communicating with families about their child's developmental needs.

Wanda. Wanda has been teaching for three years and has had experience teaching 2 and 3 year olds. Wanda was in the process of working toward her Birth-Kindergarten degree. She currently has a two-year Associates Degree in Early Childhood Education. During the time of the study, Wanda was teaching three-year olds. Wanda had focused her research efforts toward improving the outdoor area for her children. She

had noticed some aggressive behaviors when her children were outdoors and attributed the aggression to not having enough items for the outdoor environment to keep the children interested and occupied. Wanda's action research topic was improving the outdoor learning area by adding more open-ended materials.

Jackie. Jackie has been teaching for five years and has always taught three-year olds. Jackie has a two-year Associates Degree in Early Childhood. Jackie has plans to continue her degree over the next two years. Jackie had focused her research efforts to integrating more technology in the classroom and as a communication tool with families. Jackie noticed when she visited other child care sites that other teachers were integrating technology in a different way than what she had been doing in her own classroom. Jackie had one computer in her room and it did not work most of the time. Jackie's action research topic was integrating updated technology in the classroom and using technology to communicate with families.

Avery. Avery has been teaching for three years and has had experience teaching children ages 1-3 years old. Avery has her two-year Associates Degree in Early Childhood Education and is working toward a Birth-Kindergarten degree. During the time of the study, Avery was teaching two-year olds. Avery had focused her research efforts to involving families on a more consistent basis through classroom projects. Having taught younger children, Avery had noticed that the parental involvement seemed to become less of a priority as the children became older. Avery's action research topic was involving families in the curriculum through class projects.

Veronica. Veronica has been teaching for almost two years and has only worked with three year olds. Veronica is in the process of completing her Associates Degree and had at least 18 credit hours toward her degree at the time of the study. Veronica had focused her research efforts on a recycling project first for her classroom and then as a center-wide project. Veronica noticed the lack of recycling and had been contemplating about taking this on as a project for a while. The action research model provided the incentive she needed to get it started. Veronica's action research topic was integrating recycling into the daily curriculum.

Cora. Cora has been teaching for almost five years and was recently moved to a four-year old classroom. Cora had experience teaching two and three year olds before working with four-year olds. Cora just completed her Birth-Kindergarten degree and is thinking about going on to pursue her Master's Degree. Cora noticed when she was completing her degree that her center did not have very many materials or resources that were helpful in providing up-to-date research for the classroom. Cora's action research topic was building a resource library to be utilized by all of the teachers for their classroom and for continuing their education.

Site Two Participants

Molly. Molly has been teaching for five years and has recently completed her Birth-Kindergarten degree. Molly had originally worked with two-year olds for several years and then was moved to work with four-year olds due to having her Birth-Kindergarten degree. At the time of the study, Molly was in a North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten classroom. The nature of this classroom is that these students are

considered at risk and most have never been in childcare before. This created several issues in her classroom with parent involvement being almost non-existent. Molly initially focused her research efforts toward parent involvement, but shifted to researching characteristics of low-income families. Her action research topic was making connections with hard to reach families.

Lana. Lana has been teaching for four and a half years. Her experience has been teaching three and four year olds. Lana has also recently completed her Birth-Kindergarten degree, which qualified her to teach in the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten classroom. At the time of the study, Lana was teaching in another Pre-Kindergarten classroom and had experienced some of the same issues as Molly. This led the two teachers to collaborate on their topic since they were both experiencing similar issues. Lana's action research topic was making connections with hard to reach families and communicating with families with diverse languages.

Elise. Elise has been teaching for almost four years. She has a two-year Associates Degree in Early Childhood and had only been a lead teacher for one year at the time of the study. Elise had experience with two and three year olds, but taught three year olds at the time of the study. Elise noticed transitions were an issue in her classroom. The focus of her research was on three-year-old behaviors and her action research topic was creating smooth transitions for the active classroom.

Kristy. Kristy has been teaching for five and a half years and has always been with two year olds. She has a two-year Associates Degree and has plans to continue to pursue her Birth-Kindergarten degree. Kristy's research focus was on rough and tumble

play. At the time of the study, she had older two year olds that were about to turn three years old. She noticed with her classroom demographics that she had more boys than girls and she had noticed an increase in rough and tumble play during transitions and free play. Kristy had similar issues with transitions as Elise did in her classroom. This led to Kristy and Elise sharing some research in the area of transitions. Kristy's action research topic was controlling the rough and tumble play in the classroom.

Sonya. Sonya has been teaching for two years and has her two-year Associates Degree in Early Childhood. During the time of the study, Sonya was teaching two-year-olds. Sonya's research focus was on transitions because she noticed several of her children having a hard time transitioning into the classroom in the morning and during naptime. She related to the struggles Elise and Kristy were having in their classrooms since the children were near the same age. This led Sonya to collaborate with Kristy and Elise and share some of the research on transitions. Sonya's action research topic was creating smooth transitions during hard transition times in the classroom.

Sherry. Sherry has been teaching for a little over five years and has her Birth-Kindergarten degree. She has always worked with older children. She originally worked with the after-school group for a few years before she transitioned into the full day classroom teaching older four year olds. Sherry's research focus was on helping a child with Autism create relationships in the classroom. During the time of this study, Sherry had a new child that had started in her classroom that had been diagnosed with Autism. She did not have any experience in working with children that were diagnosed with Autism and did not have any resources that were helpful in knowing how to plan for the

child's special needs. The child was having difficulty acclimating to being around other children in the classroom and had difficulty during transitions. Sherry's action research topic was compiling strategies for orienting a child with Autism into a new learning environment.

Action to Influence Professional Development Model

The time spent with the participants at their sites allowed me to observe the process that took place while they implemented action research as a new method of professional development. I was able to observe the actions at each phase of the implementation and the influences on the participant's professional practices at the end of the research. I was also able to gain greater insight through interviewing each of the participants to identify their perceptions during the process. All that information led to a professional development model called the action to influence professional development model (Figure 2) that can be utilized in other early childhood settings in the future.

The model serves as a visual representation of the data to answer the central question: How does the process of utilizing action research influence the professional development of early childhood educators as it relates to their professional practices? The process led to two stages of change in the educator's professional practice: (a) implementation phase and (b) solidification phase.

The first stage of change, the implementation phase, went from the educator's lack of understanding about action research to a sense of ownership of action research as a professional development method. The second stage of change, the solidification phase, went from ownership of action research as a professional development method to the

tendency to utilize action research in relation to future professional practices. During the interviews, the educators revealed their perceptions about action research as their knowledge of the process advanced. These perceptions were used to formulate themes that guided the development of a professional development model (Figure 2).

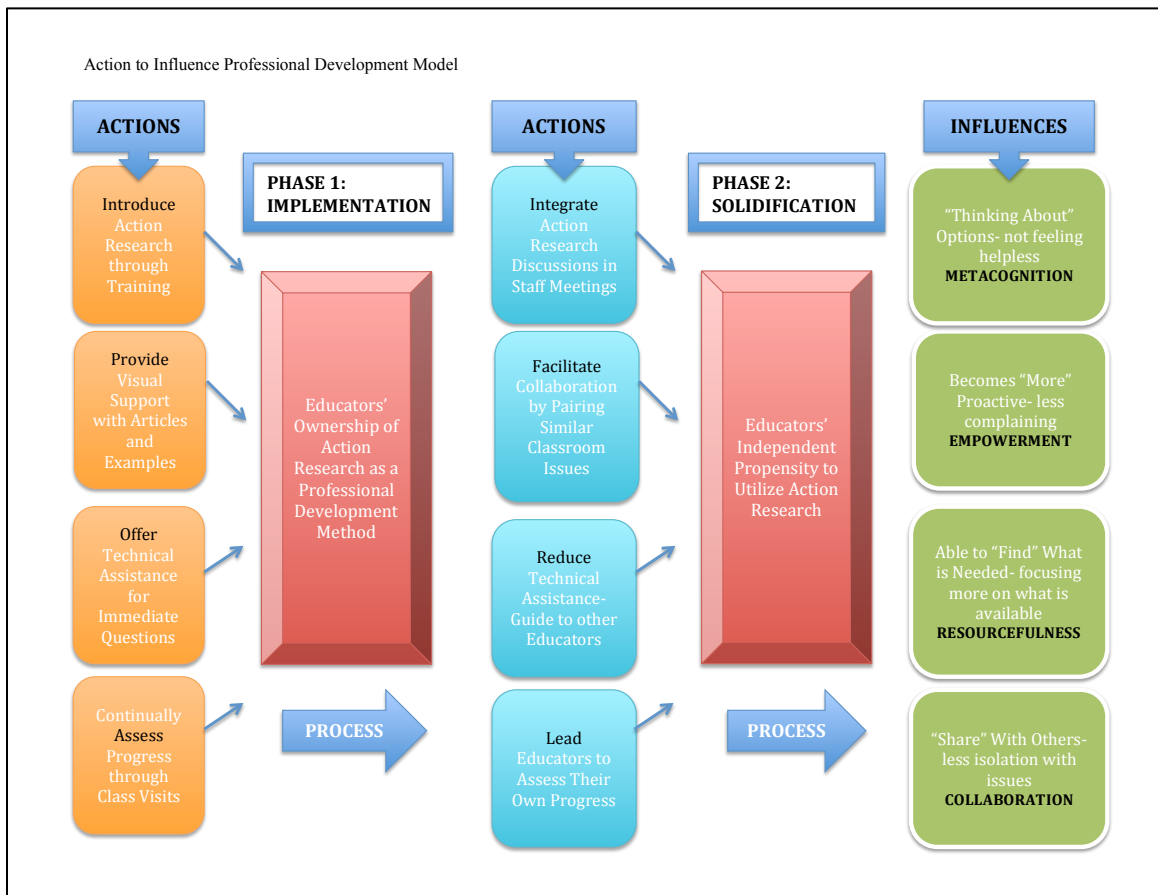


Figure 2. Action to influence professional development model. This figure represents the visual interpretation of the process utilized by educators when implementing action research as a professional development method.

Phase 1: Implementation Phase

The first stage of change, the implementation phase, was noticeable after the action research training and initial implementation into the classroom. After the training was administered with visual examples, the beginning of the implementation phase started with continuous classroom visits so I could offer technical assistance if needed. It was during this time that the participants selected their topics for research based on observations in their classrooms. I offered assistance to the participants if they were still unsure about the topic they wanted to pursue for their action research.

Once they identified their topic area and had a direction, they independently began research on their topic. During this phase, a change took place in how the participants viewed action research. Based on their answers from the initial interview questions (Appendix C) to their first journal entry after the training, the participants took more ownership in the process of implementing action research once they had a better understanding of the process. Most of the hesitations they expressed at the beginning in the initial interview were no longer present after going through training on action research, seeing examples of other action research projects, and receiving technical assistance in their own classroom. The participants reported a higher level of confidence after gaining a better understanding of the process (Figure 3).

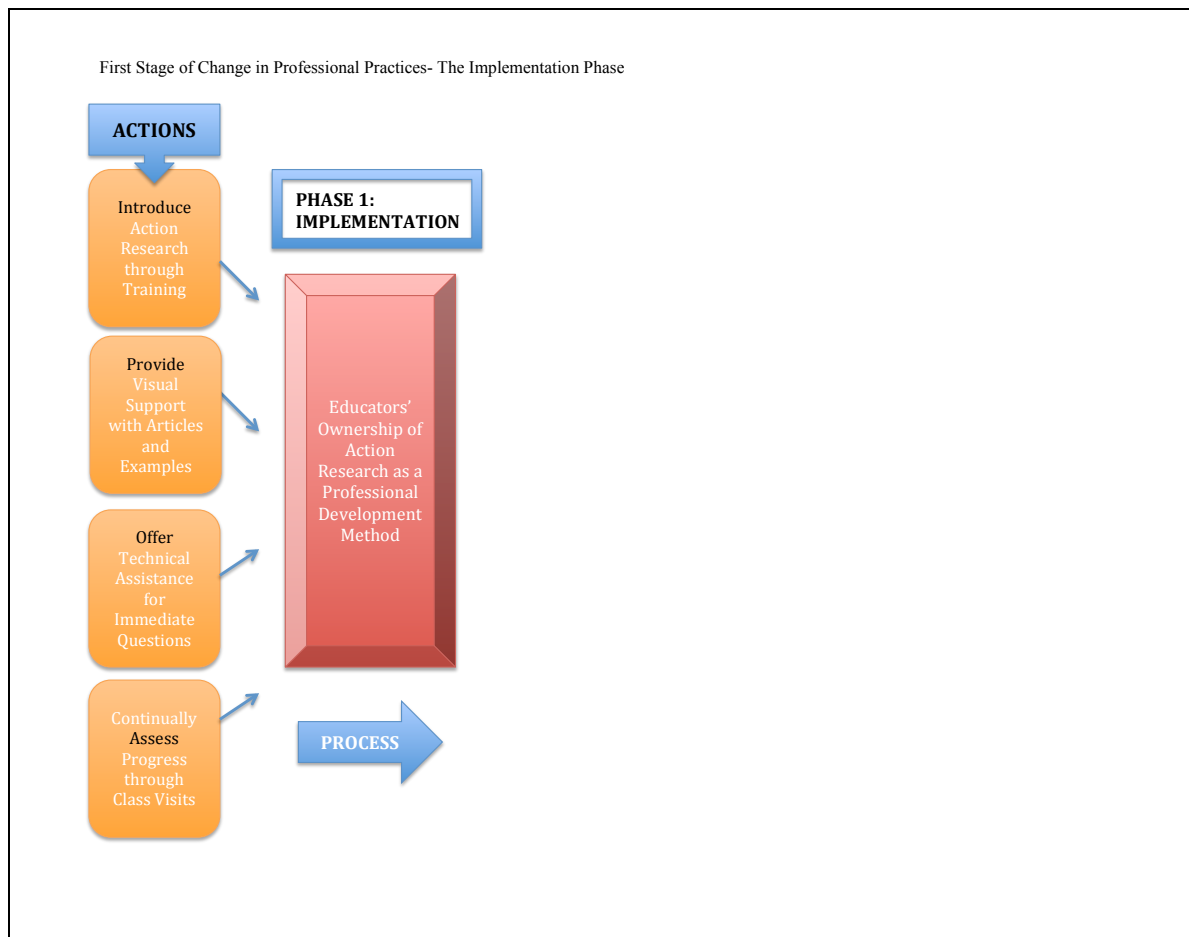


Figure 3. First stage of changes in professional practices- Implementation Phase. This figure represents the process of change that takes place during the initial stages of implementation of action research.

First Stage of Change in Perception

During the first stage of change in perception and professional practices (implementation phase), the participants were in the process of transitioning away from being concerned about three particular areas- (a) the amount of time it would take to implement, (b) the increased workload of implementing action research and (c) the level of difficulty in implementing action research. These concerns initially hindered the participants from taking ownership of the process. Prior to training, the participants indicated in the initial, semi-structured interview that the above issues were a prominent concern.

Time-consuming. Elise had voiced her concern about the process being time-consuming during the interview by saying, “It’s going to take some time to do it.” Shannon responded by saying, “Sounds like it can take up a lot of time.” In an already busy environment, Shannon’s comments reflected what several other participants thought when they initially heard about a new project to explore. Avery simply stated the process sounded like it would be “hard and long.”

However, after the training was administered and the participants had an opportunity to see examples of projects and ask questions, then their perception shifted from thinking the process would be too time-consuming to a more manageable view of the process. After the completion of the training, the participants had an opportunity to record concerns they had at that time in their journal. Elise, who had been concerned about the process taking some time to implement simply wrote, “No concerns now.” Shannon had initially been concerned about it taking up a lot of time and in her journal

she wrote, “I am feeling better about all of this now that I have a topic.” During the training, the participants had an opportunity to explore possible topics of interest and several had a better idea when they left the training about their direction. Avery who had earlier expressed she felt the process would be “hard and long” showed a shift in perception when she wrote in her journal, “I’m ready to get started.” The concern about the process being time-consuming was alleviated when the participants gained a better understanding of the level of research expected and when they were assured they would have guidance throughout the process.

Increased workload. An additional area of concern of the participants was the possibility of their workload increasing due to implementing action research in the classroom. Jackie was concerned about being able to handle the extra work without the help of her assistant. She referenced her assistant in her initial interview by saying, “She’s good, but she isn’t going to do anything extra.” Lana had similar concerns and questioned, “Will I have some help if I don’t know what I am doing?” Kristy’s comments were aligned by saying, “It makes me feel like it’s going to take too much time and I wouldn’t be looking forward to more work.”

After the training session, the concern about the increased workload had been shifted toward a different perception about a shared distribution of work. The participants recognized they would have assistance and time was being dedicated to specifically research their chosen topics. When asked to write in their journals about any existing concerns after the training, Jackie wrote, “None right now.” Lana responded by writing, “Not really hesitant now.” Sherry was initially concerned about being in the classroom

alone and not having help with implementing. Once she understood that I would be visiting their classrooms to provide technical assistance then her perception changed, which is evident in her journal entry. Sherry wrote, “Glad that there will be help with this” showing less concern than she previously had about “not having any assistance with this.” Kristy still showed some level of concern when she wrote, “I still don’t know where to begin with my topic.” This statement indicated she still had some concern about the next area of change- the level of difficulty.

Difficulty. The participants shared concerns they had about the process being too difficult. Sherry described her view of action research as “hard and scary” during the initial interview. Wanda equated the process with previous course work and said her first thought was, “I was back in school.” When asked more about this, she said she had difficulty with research papers and the term “action research” reminded her of previous degree work. Avery had a similar view of research and thought the process would be “hard and long.”

However, after training, the participants had less concern about the level of difficulty and expressed more confidence in moving forward. Sherry was less concerned with the difficulty knowing she had “help with this.” Wanda’s concern was not as much about whether she would be able to accomplish the task due to difficulty as much as having the information needed to make the task easier. She had additionally expressed in her initial interview that her concern was about whether she would be “lost or not.” After training, she simply wrote, “Feeling better. I got this.” Avery showed more confidence and less concern when she wrote that she was “ready to get started.”

Once the three areas of concern were addressed during training and in follow-up technical assistance visits, then the participants were able to display a shift in perception about the process of implementing action research in the learning environment. They shifted from having perceptions about the process that included it being too time-consuming, having an increased workload and very difficult to it being manageable in relation to time, workload and difficulty. These changes in perception resulted in the participants taking on more ownership of the process and beginning implementation, which represented the first stage of change- the implementation phase.

Phase 2: Solidification Phase

The second stage of change, the solidification phase, was noticeable after action research was being utilized in the classrooms and the participants had opportunities to see some type of improvement. After receiving on-going technical assistance during the initial implementation, the participants had demonstrated a sense of ownership over the process. During the technical assistance, I made observational notes when I visited each classroom and recorded what type of assistance they needed if any. In addition, I would ask them about ways they were able to collaborate during the process.

It was during this phase of the implementation that another shift in the participants' professional practices was noticed. At this point, action research was being implemented in the classroom and the participants had been encouraged to discuss their progress during their staff meeting times. During classroom visits, when similar issues would arise then I would pair those participants so they could share resources. The pairing was mostly initiated during staff meeting times when the participants could

discuss the issues in their classrooms and share ideas. The first few times I simply suggested they take time to talk to each other, which led to other spontaneous collaborative sessions beyond the meeting time. As the questions in the classroom began to decrease, I reduced the technical assistance and guided questions to the participants who seemed to be further along in the process. I reminded the participants to use the process and progress handout (Appendix D) to assess their own progress. I scheduled the open-ended, follow-up interview (Appendix H) to gain information to answer sub-question 2: How do educators perceive collaboration during the process of implementing action research in an early childhood environment? It was from information gained during this interview that revealed the next shift in the participants' professional practices related to action research. The participants had moved from having more of an ownership of action research as a professional development method to having an independent tendency to utilize action research to gain knowledge for future classroom issues (Figure 4).

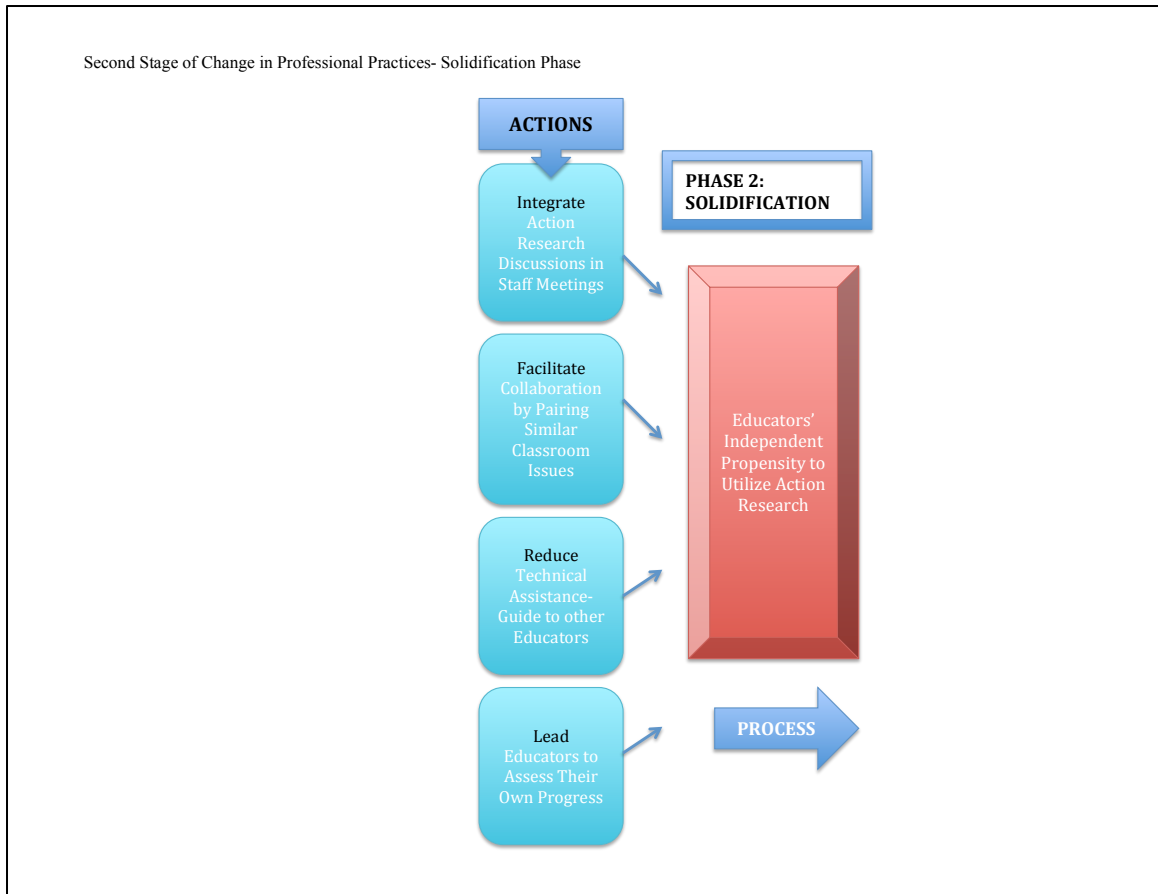


Figure 4. Second stage of changes in professional practices- Solidification Phase. This figure represents the process of change that takes place during the implementation phase of action research.

Second Stage of Change in Perception

During the implementation of action research in the classroom, the participants had varying success at finding information to assist them in creating their action plans. During the staff meeting times it became noticeable that a change had occurred and the open-ended, follow-up interview supported this noticeable change. When the participants began to find success in their research they began seeking information on other topics and sharing ideas during staff meetings. Sharing information with others as a theme was

beginning to emerge during the observations of the staff meetings and this concept was reinforced during the follow-up interviews and journals. An additional change that was noticeable was in the confidence and initiative displayed in moving forward with research and the follow-up ideas. The participants were also seeking out other resources they had not utilized before implementing action research. Another noticeable concept was the willingness of the participants to reflect on their current teaching practices and seek new ways to approach learning. These concepts, (a) sharing information, (b) displaying confidence and initiative, (c) seeking new resources and (d) reflecting on practices supported the second stage, known as the solidification phase, of change in perception related to independently engaging in action research.

Sharing information with others. Staff meetings were conducted at each site during varying times and conducted by the site administrator. Site one met less frequently than site two based on their schedule. I attended several staff meetings as an observer and was available to answer questions that might arise during the discussion pertaining to action research. Having attended staff meetings during different phases of the project, changes in discussion and practices were noticeable. The first noticeable difference was in the amount of information the participants shared with each other. At earlier staff meetings, the administrator represented most of the conversation. As the project progressed, I noticed that participants were beginning to share more information during the meeting. After conducting research, they were able to share information that was current with other staff members. The administrators at both sites encouraged discussions about the action research implementation process during their staff meetings. During one

of the staff meetings, Wanda was eliciting input from the other participants about what they wanted to see changed on the playground since she was focusing on the outdoor environment for her research. She was asking the teachers what they liked about the current setting and what they would like to see added for their particular age group. Other participants shared their findings when they found something in research they anticipated could be utilized by the other participants. Sherry indicated that others had shared information that was beneficial for her by saying, “Some teachers had a child that was Autistic before and gave me some ideas about what they had tried.” Lana confirmed the same idea by sharing that she and Molly had shared ideas when she said, “We’ve given each other ideas to try and been able to look up some articles together on our breaks.” The staff meeting atmosphere had provided opportunities for the participants to share information with each other.

In addition to the staff meetings, sharing information was a concept that was reinforced through the open-ended, follow-up interview. Shannon expressed during the interview that she had “helped Veronica with some of her research on technology.” Shannon had attended a workshop earlier and had some information she thought would be useful to share. Veronica returned the favor to others by sharing an article she had found that she thought would be beneficial to the other classrooms. She chose to share the information because she thought it would be “helpful.” Molly expressed a similar reasoning for sharing information. She shared how she and another participant had worked together by saying, “We’ve had some time we could work together on our issues. Lana and I are having similar issues with reaching our families and getting them

involved. We've interacted a lot recently." This indicated that the interactions had increased during the implementation.

Confidence and initiative. Another noticeable shift was in the amount of confidence and initiative the participants displayed as they moved beyond just taking ownership of the implementation to independently utilizing action research on their own. Wanda shared some of her research findings about playground ideas with the group during a staff meeting, which started another discussion about ways they could fund some of the additions through fundraisers. The administrator commented after the meeting that she was glad to see her staff taking initiative about seeking funding rather than relying on her to locate sources. Sonja indicated that working together as a team led to more confidence and initiative when she said, "We've been working together as a team on this. It's been really helpful to be able to have time to talk about our problems in the classroom and not feel like we are all alone." Kristy displayed confidence when she indicated she was feeling good about the process by being able to solve her own problems through research. She could see herself as a researcher when she said, "it seemed to click." Shannon displayed a higher level of confidence in her journal when she wrote, "I'm not sure that this would be considered a success story yet, but I can see the possibilities." She later indicated an even higher level of confidence in her journal by complimenting herself on an achievement by writing, "I'm getting good at finding resources." Resources were the next area of noticeable change.

Seeking out new resources. Once participants began to have conversations about their particular research topics, it was noticeable that they had not been utilizing some of

the most valuable resources available to them- each other. Kristy reiterated this idea by saying, “It was very helpful. We were able to collaborate about issues and discuss new approaches with our co-workers.” Elise expressed a similar sentiment by saying, “It was helpful to have someone to bounce ideas off with and to know that we all had similar issues in our classroom. That was comforting to know that we were not alone in our issues.” Shannon said that utilizing other people as a resource was beneficial because, “Getting started together was helpful because we could ask each other questions.” The participants were seeking out advice from each other and sharing their knowledge of particular subjects to assist in classroom situations. Cora’s topic of research was on creating more resources for the teachers to utilize in planning. She initiated the process at her site to find out what was available so they could share resources among the classrooms. She said, “I surveyed everybody’s class to find out what types of resources they already had. I needed to get a good list before I started looking for other materials.” Lana expressed a benefit of sharing resources among the teachers when she said, “We have to look out for each other.” Having opportunities to talk about different ideas revealed a variety of resources that could be shared among the participants at their individual sites.

Reflecting on practices. Another noticeable change during this phase was the increase in the amount of journal entries by the participants. They were using the journals to reflect on situations and ideas. Teacher reflection has always been an important component in improving practices, but it is difficult to monitor self-reflection. The journals utilized in this study proved to be an important component in collecting

information about reflective practices and teacher perceptions. The participants were guided to complete their first entry at the end of the training session. They were provided guiding questions to assist them in recording thoughts in their journal. However, the journals seemed to transform into a personal journal for the participants where they recorded their successes and failures along with inspirational ideas. The participants wrote about areas that were exciting and items that irritated them. The journal provided a way for some to express their true voice that might not have been reflected in the interviews or observations.

Sherry expressed struggles throughout the process due to being the only teacher in her classroom. Her topic was about finding ways to integrate a child with Autism into the regular classroom activities and she wrote about her frustrations often in the journal. She expressed having tried a particular strategy and it not going well when she wrote,

I am feeling very overwhelmed right now. Not necessarily with this project, but with my teaching situation. I want to do what is best for each of these children and I feel like I am failing them on so many levels. I can't give them the individual time they deserve and I want to do what is best. I have just tried one of the strategies with XXXXX and it caused an outburst. I am afraid he will hurt himself or another child. Thinking back to how I introduced it to him, I was probably too distracted to make it work properly. He needs my full attention at times and with a full class I have to look away several times when I am talking to him. I think he senses that I am not fully focused on him. I am going to try again during naptime tomorrow when he will have my full attention. Hope it works.

The reflective tone when she thinks back about how she introduced the strategy to him shows she is thinking about what went wrong and how she can try something different at a later time. Without reflection, many times teachers give up and do not try to implement something again. Reflection can serve the purpose to plan alternatives or just to reflect on a new idea. Thinking about how to make a new idea work is the subject of Molly's entry when she writes,

I need to figure out the best method to reach my families. They obviously do not read the board, so I need to find out what they are reading. I'm going to try sending text messages next and if that doesn't work I am going to revert back to attaching a note to a food item. Food always gets their attention.

Molly was using the reflective journal to work through ideas and to vent some frustration over her families not reading the board she prepared. Other participants used the journal as a way of being encouraging to themselves. Wanda continually wrote brief affirmations to herself throughout the implementation phase. She wrote, "You can do this. Get it together" and "Staying on top of things- yeah" in her journal to give herself encouragement. No matter how the journal is utilized, it serves as a way to encourage educators to think about their classrooms and strategies and to record their thoughts.

The four areas- sharing information with others, displaying more confidence and initiative, seeking out resources and reflecting on practices were steps toward independently engaging in action research and represented the second stage of change in perception- the solidification phase. The participants were not directed to share information at the level they did among their colleagues. They did so independently. The

success the participants found in researching their own issues led them to show more confidence in other areas such as planning fundraisers and speaking up about issues they were unaware they shared in the classroom. The participants also found resources in each other and in previous trainings they had not accessed in awhile. Elise reinforced this idea by sharing, “I didn’t realize until now that we all had the same issues. We could’ve been helping each other this whole time- we’ve just never talked about it.” Reflection was an obvious change due to the increase in journal entries. The four areas of change were the beginning of the final influences that emerged at the end of the study.

Final Influences of the Process

As the participants moved beyond the first two stages of change in their professional practices, the final stage of the process revealed the four main influences related to a shift in perception and professional practices. These influences represent the last part of the professional development model, the action to influence professional development model (Figure 2), which identifies the change in professional practices of the participants in this study. The concepts that evolved into a set of influences emerged from the focus group interview, observations and journal entries. The final influences on professional practices were identified in this study as: (a) metacognition, (b) empowerment, (c) resourcefulness and (d) collaboration.

These influences became evident during the constant comparison of data and coding of themes during the analysis. Each of these influences reflect the final process that took place during the implementation of action research in the early childhood classrooms and were formed by the perceptions of the participants.

Metacognition. Metacognition is an influence that emerged from the initial idea of the participants having options and not feeling helpless in their situation. Connected to the previous concept of reflecting on practices, metacognition became the descriptor that encompassed how the participants relayed their thoughts and perceptions about the new knowledge and ideas they were experiencing. They reported thinking about things differently, which led to new action. The participants were able to think about the process and make decisions based on previous and new knowledge. Metacognition was evident in some of the journal entries as the participants were completing their action research projects. In reflecting about practices Molly wrote, “I’m starting to see how this can actually save me time.” Lana was reflecting on the practice of basing new ideas on research when she said, “I’m already looking at other areas that can be helped with a little research.” The sharing of information led to new knowledge and application of ideas. Elise shared about gaining information from her co-workers and said, “I get some ideas about fun activities or something that really worked in a transition.” Her research topic had been transitions in the classroom and she was able to gain new ideas from her co-workers that she was able to implement in the classroom. Sonja touched on the idea of being a reflective teacher when she stated, “Action research makes me think of stepping back and analyzing something.” The constant analysis of new information and trying ideas shows a higher level of thought and application. The journals provided an opportunity for the participants to record their thoughts about the process and to analyze ideas, which made the journal a platform for metacognition. Cora was reflective about

what she was noticing in her co-workers attitudes about research and collaboration when she wrote,

I have had the opportunity to witness an awakening in several of my co-workers.

They seem to enjoy learning about new topics and our conversations have changed from complaining about the lunch menu to planning a garden to add fresh vegetables to our menu. We have moved from not having a voice to being active advocates for our children. If we can continue to share ideas I know we will be a force to be reckoned with in the world of education. I am inspired.

It was interesting to be able to see glimpses of how the participants were thinking when they were not focused on just answering a question. For this reason, I feel the journals were important pieces of data in gaining insight into the participants' perceptions for this study.

Empowerment. Empowerment emerged as an influence in this study as the participants displayed confidence in their new abilities as researchers and focused more on being more proactive rather than complaining. Connected to the previous concept of confidence and initiative, empowerment captured the essence of seeing themselves as competent researchers and possessing the power to make effective changes. During the focus group interview, Wanda stated, "I see myself being a researcher. I feel strong." Veronica displayed empowerment when she stated, "I've always liked learning how to make things better and I feel more in control with this." These statements showed a shift in thought from before when they were concerned about being lost during the process and not knowing what to do during the initial interview.

By engaging in action research, teachers view their professional development as an ongoing process. Shannon stated in the focus group interview, “I’m already thinking about how I can use it for another issue I am having in my class.” Molly displayed empowerment for future decisions when she shared her confidence in the focus group interview saying,

I can see myself using it (action research) again to find alternative options to what is already out there. Some things don’t work and it was nice to be able to help myself rather than relying on somebody else to tell me what to do.

By taking an active role in their own professional development, the participants displayed signs of feeling empowered to make changes in their learning environment.

Resourcefulness. Resourcefulness emerged as an influence to professional practices during the focus group interview session. A theme that became repetitive was being more aware of using materials they already had available to them. Aligned with the previous concept of seeking out new resources, resourcefulness is a descriptor of the participants’ ability to identify areas of support in the learning environment. During the course of this study, the participants seemed to focus less on what they didn’t have to being more resourceful with what was available to them. Resources were no longer just items, but people. Cora stated during the focus group interview, “I thought before that I knew basically what it (action research) was, but after getting to work together as a staff I liked sharing ideas and helping it all pull together.” The participants also seemed to utilize items they had available to them more effectively. Veronica’s action research topic was about being resourceful and recycling. During the focus group interview she said, “I

use to feel like I didn't have enough resources, but they are at my fingertips." Kristy echoed that sentiment by saying, "Before, I just thought we couldn't do anything because we didn't have the supplies we need. It's not all about buying new stuff... it's about using what we already have." Resourcefulness is an influence that will change the way the educators function when it comes to planning activities and lessons in addition to solving issues in their classroom.

Collaboration. Collaboration was another influence that emerged throughout the study. Collaboration was a main focus during the follow-up, open-ended interview (Appendix H). Aligned with the previous concept of sharing information, collaboration as a descriptor includes communicating with colleagues in a variety of ways beyond just sharing information. The increased collaborative efforts in this study led to less isolation among the educators and prompted them to talk more about their classroom issues as a source of support for each other beyond just sharing ideas.

In this study, the participants reflected on collaboration and the type of environment that would foster more collaboration. Even though they were in a noisy and busy environment, the participants found ways to collaborate. Veronica expressed enjoying times that were specifically set apart for collaboration when she said, "During staff development days we have time to work together." In a classroom setting, collaboration has to be an effort that is made because it will not happen naturally according to Cora. She talked about utilizing naptime where they "sit at the tables and plan out everything for the next week. It's quiet and we can spread out on the table to work." Kristy shared one of the benefits of collaborating when she stated, "It's brought us

all closer. We've talked more recently than we had this whole past year." Cora expressed a similar idea by saying, "We have had time to collaborate on some of the ideas we are each using and help each other through when we didn't quite understand something." Molly mentioned some of the barriers to collaboration when she talked about it being hard to collaborate "when there is too much going on. It gets distracting."

Collaboration became one of the influences that emerged near the end of the study as a positive aspect of the action research process, according to information gathered at the focus group interview. Highlighting their experience during the process of implementing action research in their environment has assisted me in gaining greater insight to how this process can be utilized in future settings. Taking their perspective under consideration will lead to more effective professional development opportunities in other early childhood environments.

The four influences just discussed represent the change in professional practices that took place among the participants and the outcome during this study (Figure 5). As the participants were able to apply their new knowledge of action research in their classrooms, they were exposed to changes in their professional practices based on their experiences. The previous actions taken during the process of implementing action research in the early childhood environment led to these lasting influences that will guide future professional development for the participants.

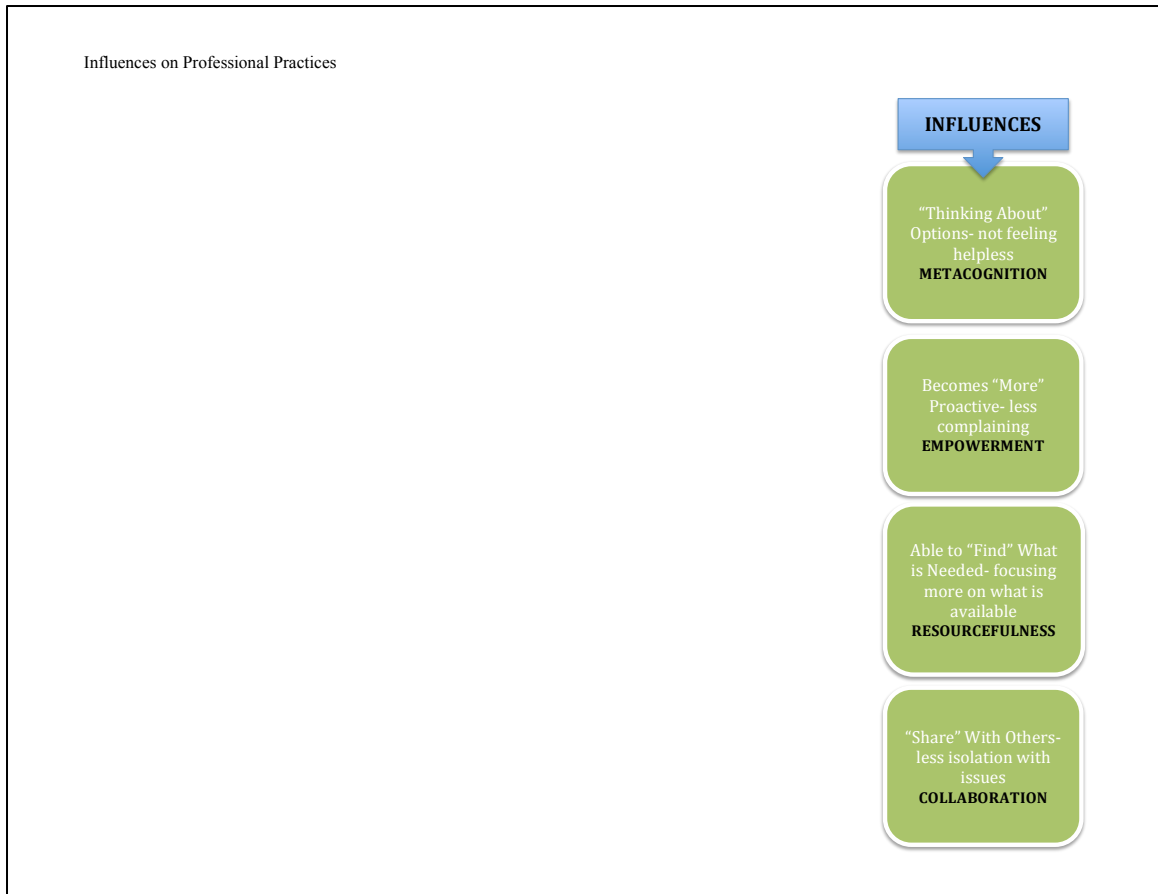


Figure 5. Influences on professional practices. This figure represents the outcome of the study and the process of change that takes place after the implementation phase of action research.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Guiding Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to answer the questions that guided the research to lead to an enlightened understanding of the process of implementing action research as a professional development method. In this section, I discuss how each question contributed to the formation of the action to influence professional development model (Figure 2) and how they align with the stages of change represented by the

implementation phase and solidification phase along with the final influences on professional practices discovered during the course of this study.

Answering the Central Question

To answer the central research question of how the process of utilizing action research influences the professional development of early childhood educators as it relates to their professional practices, I created a model grounded in data collected from the early childhood sites represented in this study. The model, action to influence professional development model (Figure 2), reflects two stages of change that takes place with the educators' professional practices during the process of implementing action research. The change in professional practices leads to a changed perspective and final influences that represent how the process has altered the professional practices of the educators.

The first stage of change, the Implementation Phase, was from the educator's lack of understanding about action research to a new sense of ownership of action research as a professional development method. During this stage, participants were providing information about their perceptions prior to training and implementing in the early childhood environment. Once they participated in training and began the implementation in their classrooms, their perception about the process changed to reflect a sense of ownership. The concepts that emerged initially were about (a) the process being too time-consuming, (b) an increase in workload and (c) difficulty in administering. However, after receiving training and having opportunities to gain a full understanding of the

process, the participants had a change in perception that reflected a sense of anticipation and relief.

The second stage of change, the Solidification Phase, was from ownership of action research as a professional development method to the tendency to utilize action research in relation to future professional practices. When the participants began to successfully apply research and see the results of their efforts, they moved from the initial phase of implementation into a solidification phase. Sharing information with others was a concept that emerged during this second stage of change. Additional concepts that emerged were related to the confidence and initiative of the participants and seeking out other resources they had not utilized before implementing action research. A final concept that emerged was related to reflection of practices. These concepts, (a) sharing information, (b) displaying confidence and initiative, (c) seeking new resources and (d) reflecting on practices supported the second stage, the solidification phase, of change in perception related to independently engaging in action research.

The outcome of the study reveals four main influences that can impact future professional practices: (a) metacognition, (b) empowerment, (c) resourcefulness, and (d) collaboration. Although there were elements of these influences from the beginning of the data collection, it was not until the final interview when these influences completely emerged as an influence on the professional practices of the participants. The previous concepts identified during axial coding were divided into individual categories for analysis and placed in similar sub-categories (Appendix P). Data collected during the interviews, observations and through journal entries were all used to identify the main

influences on professional practices to formulate the action to influence professional development model (Figure 2). This model reflects the stages of change during data collection and the final model product based on analysis.

Answering Sub-Question 1

Information about the perceptions held by educators prior to beginning the research process was based on research sub-question 1: How do educators perceive action research prior to implementing in an early childhood environment? This question was answered during the semi-structured, initial interview questions (Appendix C). Questions 10, 11 and 12 focused on gaining information from the participants about how they perceived action research.

Question 10 was designed to derive what the participant already knew about action research by asking for a description of the following: What do you know about action research? This question produced a variety of answers and gave insight to how much exposure the participants had to action research prior to beginning the study (Appendix Q). Although none of the participants had ever engaged in action research, some had heard of the concept in their educational training. Out of the 12 participants, three had some knowledge about action research. Their knowledge was very limited based on their answers. Cora had limited knowledge of the process, but had some exposure to the topic based on her response. She stated, “It’s coming up with a plan for your classroom, I think.” Elise said, “It’s some type of research” based on her knowledge of the topic. Sonja was the only participant that seemed to have studied action research before. She stated, “From what I have read before, I think it is about looking at yourself

as a teacher and making some changes based on what you have done before.” This indicated she had an opportunity to read about action research, but had never fully engaged in the process.

Question 11 was designed to derive what the participants thought about the term action research. They were asked to describe their first thoughts when they were asked the following: What are your first thoughts when you hear the words “action research”? This question also produced a variety of answers and provided an even broader understanding of how action research was perceived by the participants prior to training (Appendix Q). The most prominent idea was that action research would be time-consuming. Out of 12 participants, five answered that one of their first thoughts about action research was that it would take a lot of time or too much time. Four participants expressed it would be difficult and more work. Shannon was one of the participants that indicated she thought the process would be time-consuming when she stated, “Sounds like it can take up a lot of time.” Jackie agreed with her when she said, “It sounds like it would take too much time.” Kristy expressed two concerns stating, “Well I think it makes me feel like it’s going to take too much time and I wouldn’t be looking forward to more work.” Three out of 12 participants expressed positive comments. Cora said, “I think of making a plan and changing something.” Sonja was more specific by saying, “Action research makes me think of stepping back and analyzing something.” Molly simply expressed that she thought it would be “helpful” with her teaching.

Question 12 was designed to derive a list of concerns the participants may have about the process of implementing action research prior to having a clear understanding

of what is entailed. This question seemed to reinforce the first thoughts described by the participants in the previous question. The participants were asked the following: What thoughts or concerns would you have about implementing action research in your classroom? There were some main concerns relayed by the participants during the interview (Appendix Q). The question caused the participants to think about implementing this new strategy and to provide concerns they may have prior to receiving any training that may cause some of the concerns to recede. The most prevalent concern was whether they would have the support and knowledge needed to implement action research. There were five out of 12 participants with that similar concern. The next concern was about the workload with four out of 12 expressing this as a concern. Time constraints were only a concern of two participants. Wanda was specifically concerned with having the information she needed to implement action research. She said, “I really don’t know that much about it, so my concern is whether I will be lost or not.” Veronica echoed that sentiment when she expressed wondering if she would “know how to do it.” Lana was concerned about having help if she didn’t know what she was doing and wanted more information about the workload. Sherry was simply concerned about not having assistance in the classroom since she was the only teacher in her class. Although there were several concerns, a few indicated they were not concerned about the upcoming process. Sonja said, “I think it would be helpful because there may be areas that I don’t realize are a weakness.” Cora and Molly both indicated they had no concerns with Cora adding “I’m looking forward to it. I’ve heard about it, but want to learn more.”

Perceptions about action research. The above questions were designed to gain information about the perceptions held by educators prior to beginning the research process for comparison purposes later in the study. The purpose was to also answer research sub-question 1 about how the participants perceived action research prior to training and implementation. The perceptions about action research prior to training were important to understand so I could address those concerns during the training. The training had been pre-planned with an outline, but it was necessary to add some information to the training to make sure the participants were comfortable and ready to move forward with implementing action research in their classrooms. The additions to the training (Appendix R) were based on the answers from the participants to questions 11 and 12. These will be topics I will permanently add to the current training module. The additional areas that were added to the training were the following: (a) Making Time for Action Research and (b) Integrating Action Research with Ease. These topics covered the concerns about action research being time-consuming and handling the additional perceived workload.

In answering the research sub-question 1, three out of 12 had limited knowledge about action research prior to training. When asked about their first thoughts, five out of 12 expressed it would be time-consuming and four out of 12 expressed it would be difficult and would add work to their current load. Only three out of 12 expressed a positive view of action research prior to training.

When asked about specific concerns they had about implementing action research, the greatest concern was whether they would have the support and information

needed to implement action research in their classroom with five out of 12 expressing this concern. When Kristy was asked what her greatest concern was about implementing action research she stated, “Knowing where to start. I really don’t know how I would begin.” The next most prominent concern was about the extra workload with four out of 12 expressing this as an issue. One participant expressed both of the above concerns during the initial interview. Lana said, “I have a few concerns. One will I have some help if I don’t know what I am doing and two how much writing will it be?” Time constraints were noted as a concern by two participants. Avery’s concern was whether or not she would be able to “fit it in.” Elise questioned, “I was just thinking about if it would take too much time.” Three out of the 12 participants had no concerns at all about implementing action research in their classroom.

Training Alleviates Concerns

Having a better understanding of the perceptions and concerns allowed for more focused training sessions. The two additional areas: (a) Making Time for Action Research and (b) Integrating Action Research with Ease, after being added to the training module (Appendix R), seemed to diminish some of the previous concerns based on the participants’ responses and questions at the end of the training. This information came from the journal entries directly following the training. The journal reflections were introduced during the training and each group was verbally asked to answer the first guiding question to get them started. The question was as follows: What are some of your hesitations about implementing action research? Since this question was asked after the training had been implemented, the answers revealed more confidence and ownership of

the process at this point in comparison to the earlier responses prior to training. The individuals that had indicated their previous concern was about not having the level of knowledge and support they needed to implement action research now reported “feeling better” (Wanda) about the process along with “I know what I am doing now” (Veronica). Lana added that she was “not really hesitant now” and Sherry had recorded that she was “glad that there will be help with this” referring to the technical assistance. Kristy was the only participant that still listed a hesitation that had not significantly changed after the training. Kristy’s initial concern had been about “knowing where to start.” She was concerned about not knowing how to begin the process. Kristy’s answer to the guiding question indicated she still had hesitations about getting started. She wrote, “I still don’t know where to begin with my topic.” Based on this information, Kristy was one of the participants that I planned to meet with first to help her overcome the perceived challenge.

The next highest concern reported during the initial interview was about the extra workload. Shannon had expressed the concern about how it (action research) would work in her class with her other planning and lessons. She responded in her journal after the training that she was “feeling better about all of this now that I have a topic.” Jackie had initially been concerned with the amount of time action research would take to implement and if she would be able to handle the additional workload. When she responded to the journal entry prompt about any hesitations she still had about action research, she indicated her concern had been sufficiently answered in the additional training by writing, “None right now.”

With the training completed, it was time to begin the implementation of action research in the classroom. As a follow-up to the training, technical assistance was offered by visiting the classrooms to answer questions and to check on progress. This extension to the training proved to be needed and very effective with the participants getting started with the implementation. Several of the participants had some difficulty in deciding on a topic for the action research. Kristy expressed concern about knowing where to start when she said, “I really don’t know how I would begin.” Shannon indicated an earlier struggle with deciding on a topic when she said, “I’m feeling better about all of this now that I have a topic.”

As part of the training, I had initiated a brainstorming session at the end of the meeting for the participants to begin to narrow down a topic. Several had started in one direction with a topic and had changed their focus when I visited their classroom. During these initial visits, a considerable amount of time was focused on discussing possible topic options. Having this time in the classroom as a follow-up to the training assisted the participants in beginning the implementation while the information was fresh in their mind.

As the participants gained a greater understanding of the process, they expressed this confidence in their journal entries. Shannon wrote, “I’m not sure that this would be considered a success story yet, but I can see the possibilities.” Wanda simply responded in her journal by saying, “I got this!” Wanda had initially shown reservation when she answered question 12 saying, “I really don’t know that much about it (action research), so my concern is whether I will be lost or not.” Veronica displayed a greater understanding

of the process when she said, “I know what I am doing now.” At this point, the participants had shown a shift in their confidence and they were displaying attributes of empowerment.

Avery had been concerned about time constraints but wrote, “ready to get started” in her journal. Elise, who was concerned it would take too much time, simply wrote “no concerns now” as a response to what her hesitations were about implementing action research. The participants that did not have any previous concerns prior to the training were still confident in getting started. Cora had echoed a previous sentiment in her journal from her initial interview by writing “looking forward to it” and Molly and Sonja simply wrote “no concerns.”

Sub-Question 1 Summary

The concepts that emerged in answering research sub-question 1 during the initial, semi-structured interview (Appendix C) were the following:

- Time-Consuming
- Increased Workload
- “Back in School”
- Difficult
- Process as Helpful
- Reflective
- Acquired Knowledge
- Being Able to Apply Knowledge
- Having Support

- Positive Anticipation
- Enjoys Learning New Things

Information about the perceptions held by educators prior to beginning the research process was the basis for part of the initial, semi-structured interview and the research sub-question. Questions 10, 11 and 12 from the initial interview focused on gaining information from the participants about how they perceived action research. The information gathered from these questions was compiled into an open coding format to organize the concepts (Appendix L). The three themes that were emphasized several times by participants when answering were (a) time-consuming and (b) increased workload and (c) the level of difficulty in implementing. The participants were concerned about how much time the process would take and if they would be able to fit something else into their schedules. The participants also were concerned about increasing their workload and expressed not looking forward to another responsibility. The level of difficulty caused some concern with participants wondering about support during the process. Although these areas were the most expressed concepts, there were other less popular positions.

The next highest responses were related to (a) being able to apply the new knowledge in their classrooms and (b) identifying the process as being helpful. Participants expressed concerns about being lost during the process and not knowing how to begin. However, at the same level participants recognized the process as being helpful to their teaching by making a plan and applying changes. There were mixed feelings

about the impending process, but the overarching theme was one of anxiety about the unknown.

Answering Sub-Question 2

Information about the perceptions held by educators related to collaboration during the research process was based on research sub-question 2: How do educators perceive collaboration during the process of implementing action research in an early childhood environment? This question was answered during the open-ended, follow-up interview questions (Appendix H). Questions 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 focused on gaining information from the participants about how they perceived collaboration during the process.

Question 5 was designed to derive information in the form of descriptions of specific interactions while implementing action research by asking the following: Describe any interactions you have had with your colleagues in relation to action research. This question produced a variety of answers and gave insight to the specific types of collaboration that had taken place after the implementation of action research began (Appendix S). Out of the 12 participants, nine noted sharing information or resources as their main interaction during the process. Avery shared about interactions she had during staff meeting saying, “Everybody was sharing their topic and then some people had some information that could help them with their research.” Veronica expressed enjoying talking and sharing ideas and added, “I shared an article I found about recycling that everybody could use to let the parents know about the upcoming recycling project.” Molly talked about sharing resources with Lana by saying, “We’ve interacted a

lot recently to share some things. I found a really neat article and made her a copy and she's given me some ideas she found."

There were three participants that reported eliciting input from others as another interaction. Cora had visited the classrooms to gain information from her colleagues. She elicited input from others and said, "We talked about as a group what types of things we needed in our classes." Elise discussed eliciting input from others by saying, "I've asked for ideas from other teachers, too. It's good." Jackie discussed the difficulty in eliciting information by visiting the classrooms when she said, "I have had some interactions when I visited everyone's classroom to find out what types of technology we were all using. It's hard to interact though being in different classes."

Administrator support emerged during this question as a theme that supported interactions among the participants. Kristy discussed the involvement of her administrator by saying, "Our director looked up some information to help us get started and then it seemed to click, you know?" Sonja revealed seeking administrator support by saying, "We talked to our director so we could make sure we were on break at the same time." Jackie demonstrated how her administrator was supporting the process when she said, "We had some coverage for our classes if we needed any help with this (action research)."

In addition, a shift in thought took place with Elise and Kristy in relation to their professional practices. Elise shifted from not interacting as much to viewing collaboration as a beneficial option by saying, "I didn't realize until now that we all had the same issues. We could've been helping each other this whole time- we've just never talked

about it.” Kristy displayed a shift in thought about researching and solving problems by saying, “You were right... we do this all the time but we didn’t know it. (We) solve our own problems by researching. I just never thought of it as research.” Kristy’s earlier hesitations of not having enough support or knowledge have diminished due to having increased confidence in her own abilities.

Question 6 was designed to derive information about any collaboration opportunities the participants had prior to beginning this process. The question was as follows: What opportunities have you had to collaborate with colleagues prior to implementing action research? This question produced very similar answers and gave insight to the specific types of collaboration that the participants had engaged in prior to this process (Appendix S). The answers also provided a basis for comparison between before implementation and after implementation. The majority of collaboration took place during scheduled staff meeting times, but some participants were able to collaborate outside the classroom.

Lana shared about collaborating during staff meetings saying the participants were, “Talking out issues and sharing ideas.” Elise agreed that collaboration took place during staff meetings, but she added that the playground was an ideal place to brainstorm ideas for events. She shared about making plans by saying, “We come up with ideas we can do together with our classes like field day or watermelon parties.” Kristy shared some insight about how staff meetings had changed since the beginning of the action research project. Speaking initially about meetings prior to the project she said, “Everybody was late and it just seemed like a waste of time.” After the project began, Kristy shared that

staff meetings were more productive and it had “been helpful during this project” to be able to share ideas and have a focused discussion. Even though collaboration was present before the implementation of action research, it had increased now that all of the participants were working toward a similar goal in researching issues.

Question 7 was designed to derive information about the settings that promoted more collaboration by asking the following: What setting or situation has been more conducive for collaboration with your colleagues? Describe what made it more conducive. This question created some similar answers from Question 6 (Appendix S). However, with more prompting it clarified the question. The purpose was to focus on the environment and it did give some insight to the environments that promoted collaborations and situations that assisted the participants in forming collaborative groups. The overwhelming attribute was quiet, with seven out of 12 noting it was a quiet environment. This makes sense due to the noise levels in a childcare setting.

Shannon indicated the break room area was conducive by saying, “It is away from everything.” Lana took it an extra step by discussing comfort as a characteristic. She mentioned the couch in the break room and said, “After you are on your feet all day that is relaxing. I get tired of sitting on those little chairs in the classroom.” Beyond being quiet and comfortable, Sonja indicated that the time of day made a difference. She talked about when the children were asleep and she had less responsibility for supervision when she said, “I like naptime. It’s the only time I can just put on the soft music and have time to think.” The two sites had some differences in the amount of comfortable areas that

were available for staff. However, this did not seem to change their perceptions about what was conducive for collaborative efforts.

Question 8 was designed to derive information about the participants' perception of what made collaboration more positive by asking for a description of the following: In relation to collaboration, describe the positive aspects of collaborating with your colleagues. This question produced a variety of answers and gave insight to what made collaboration more likely in relation to the positive aspects listed by the participants (Appendix S). Out of 12 participants, six noted sharing information as a positive aspect. The next highest reason was the social aspect for three out of the 12 participants.

Veronica discussed how sharing information with colleagues was beneficial by saying, "When you've tried to solve a problem and you just can't figure out what to do, sometimes one of the other teachers has already went through that same situation and they can give advice about how to handle it." Sonja shared another positive aspect about seeing something in a different way when she said, "Hearing everybody's perspective on something. Your way is not always the way that works the best." Shannon simply referred to a different perspective by saying, "They have good ideas." Being able to share ideas was a positive benefit of collaboration that was noted by participants at both sites.

The social aspect of collaboration was another prominent idea that emerged. Avery reinforced this idea by saying, "I like socializing and having time to talk to everybody. It can get lonely in our classrooms away from everybody." Molly reiterated that collaborating was like being, "All in the same boat. Everybody has that one child or that one parent that drives them crazy. It's like having moral support." Kristy identified a

positive part of conversations during collaboration as, “Having time to talk to other adults. Most of my conversations are at the kid’s level.” Positive collaboration was beneficial according to the participants’ responses to these questions.

Question 9 was designed for the opposite reason, to derive information about the participants’ perception of what made collaboration less positive by asking for a description of the following: In relation to collaboration, describe some “not so positive” aspects of collaborating with your colleagues. This question produced a variety of answers and gave insight to areas of collaboration that could be avoided in the future or addressed to produce a better outcome. The answers to this question revealed a difference in the two sites based on the time limitations of staff meetings (Appendix S). Site one meets every other week for staff meeting and site two meets every Wednesday for staff meetings. The extra meeting times for site two reduced time limitations as an issue. Lack of time was a prevalent issue for site one with half of the participants noting this as a main concern.

Shannon was a site one participant and she stated, “We just don’t always have time to collaborate.” Avery elaborated on the same idea by saying, “We run out of time once we get started. When we do get time to talk then it seems to fly by and it’s time to get back to our classroom.” Cora agreed by stating that a “not so positive” aspect of collaborating was, the “lack of time to get together.”

Question 10 was the final question about collaboration and was designed to derive the participant’s opinion about whether collaboration was helpful in the process or not. The participant was asked to describe their thoughts about collaboration in the following

question: In your opinion, has collaboration been helpful in implementing action research in your classroom? Why or why not? This question produced very similar answers with a variety of reasons why they answered the way they did in relation to why they felt it was helpful (Appendix S). All participants indicated collaboration was helpful in the process of implementing action research for a variety of reasons.

Jackie shared a reason collaboration was helpful by saying, “Just being able to find out what direction other people were taking with their topics and then sharing ideas.” Kristy elaborated by saying, “It was very helpful. We were able to collaborate about issues and discuss new approaches with our co-workers. Veronica specified how it was helpful in relation to action research when she said, “Yes in my opinion it has been helpful with figuring out our topics and making sure we stayed on task.”

Perceptions about collaboration. In this study, the participants’ perceptions about collaboration were mostly favorable. Based on their interview answers, the participants viewed collaboration as an asset to the process of implementing action research in the classroom. They reported being able to share information as the main benefit of collaborating.

Collaboration was also mentioned a few times in the journal entries. Molly wrote, “It is hard to collaborate in the work place sometimes due to attending to the children. If more opportunities were allowed outside the classroom then it would make it easier.” Jackie was the only participant that mentioned technology in relation to collaboration. She wrote, “Collaborating can be challenging, but it might be less challenging if we had more access to computers. I like reading teacher blogs to get ideas.” The comments show

a desire to collaborate even though they list some of the challenges associated with collaboration.

If one teacher was experiencing a particular problem, the likelihood of other teachers having similar issues was likely. This was evident in this study at site two. Several of the teachers had similar issues and they formed a collaborative group to assist each other with the research.

Administrator support for collaboration. This theme emerged when participants were answering question 5 in the open-ended, follow-up interview (Appendix S). At site one, Jackie had indicated the participants had extra “coverage” for their classrooms if they needed to collaborate about engaging in action research. At site two, Kristy indicated her director assisted them by sharing, “Our director looked up some information to help us get started.” Also at site two, Sonja noted that the director allowed them to coordinate their break times by saying, “We talked to our director so we could make sure we were on break at the same time.” This indicated that administrators have a role in professional development based on the findings in this study. The extent of that role will be discussed in Chapter 5 under recommendations.

Sub-Question 2 Summary

The second research sub-question was: How do educators perceive collaboration during the process of implementing action research in an early childhood environment? Information about the perceptions held by educators related to collaboration during the research process was gained during the second interview, which was the open-ended, follow-up interview (Appendix H). The open-ended format yielded more information

from each participant. Questions 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 focused on gaining information from the participants about how they perceived collaboration during the process of implementing action research in their classrooms. The concepts that emerged during this interview were the following:

- Collaboration
- Empowerment
- Teacher as Researcher
- Sharing Information
- Gaining Assistance
- Distribution of Work
- Sharing Resources
- Community
- Irritating People
- Time Limitations
- Self-Centered Behaviors
- Distractions
- Support With Questions
- Support Through Similar Situations
- Support Through Ideas
- Support Through Information

During this interview, the areas that emerged as more of a focus were (a) Collaboration, (b) Sharing Information and (c) Time Limitations. Collaboration was an

obvious focus due to the subject of the interview questions relating to the participants' perception about collaboration. The participants shared they enjoyed helping each other by sharing lesson plans and ideas for activities. Participants expressed satisfaction in getting together and hearing a new perspective about their classroom issues. However, time limitations were another heavily discussed area. Participants shared their frustration at not having enough time to collaborate and not being able to discuss all of the concerns they had in their classroom.

Other areas that were less of a focus during the interview were (a) Distribution of Workload, (b) Self-Centered Behaviors and (c) Distractions. Where the concern of having an increase in workload was a focus in the first interview, the focus in the second interview was on a decrease in workload due to collaboration. The participants indicated they had less work because they were able to share the workload among those that had similar topics. When planning bigger projects, they were able to work together so the load did not seem as overwhelming. The participants also revealed some of the not so positive aspects of collaborating. They shared that some individuals displayed self-centered behaviors by demonstrating a "know it all" attitude and thinking their way was better than others. Participants also noted distractions during collaborative sessions where too much was going on in the environment and conversations would stray off subject.

Answering Sub-Question 3

Information about the perceptions held by educators related to the value of action research was based on research sub-question 3: What is the perceived value, by the participants, of implementing action research as a professional development method?

This question was answered during the last interview, which was a focus group format (Appendix I). Questions 1 and 9 were specifically designed to answer sub-question 3 about the participants' perception of implementing action research as a professional development method. This interview took place after each of the participants had completed their research on the topics and implemented their plan in their classrooms. At this point in the research, the participants had been working more independently on their action research projects.

The focus group for each site was set up during one of their regularly scheduled staff meetings. Site one had opted to have their focus group on one of their staff development days when their center was closed. Site two had scheduled their focus group interview during their regularly scheduled lead teacher staff meetings. One of the main purposes for the focus group interview (Appendix I) was to gain information to answer research sub-question 3 about the participants' perceptions of action research. The information would also be utilized to answer the central research question: How does the process of utilizing action research influence the professional development of early childhood educators as it relates to their professional practices?

Question 1 was designed to derive information about how the participants were using action research in their classroom and how they perceived it as a professional development method by asking the following: In relation to action research, how do you perceive this method and its use in your classroom? This question produced a variety of answers and gave insight to how the participants viewed action research and how they had been utilizing it in their classrooms during the implementation phase of the research

(Appendix T). Out of 12 participants, all shared a positive view of action research at varying levels.

Cora shared a higher level of confidence by saying, “I was able to find more resources for our school, which will make us all better teachers. I have more confidence now that I’ve done it once.” Jackie expressed higher confidence in her abilities by saying, “It helped me to compile a ton of information about using technology that I wouldn’t have had before. Our director was impressed with the research I did. I was pretty impressed with myself to tell you the truth.” Sherry had a positive view, but was not as enthusiastic as some of the other participants. She shared her reasons by saying,

It’s been fine. I’ve learned a lot about Autism. I started some of the strategies and I’ve noticed some improvement, so that was useful. One thing was that I don’t feel like I was able to collaborate as much as others just because my topic was so different, but I’ve been able to chime in and give some help to others.

Collaboration was a positive aspect of many of the participants. In Sherry’s case, the lack of collaboration affected how she felt about the process of action research.

Question 9 was designed to derive information about if the participants would consider using this type of professional development method in the future by asking the following: Now that you have implemented action research in your classroom, how do you see yourself utilizing this type of professional development in the future? This question produced similar answers and confirmed that most participants viewed action research as a method they would use again (Appendix T). Wanda showed her confidence when she stated, “I know that I can find answers to my questions. I won’t be stuck not

knowing how to get answers anymore. They're out there- we just have to know where to look. And I do now." Kristy showed a shift in perception when she said, "I liked finding answers and then trying them out rather than always complaining about our problems." She had been hesitant about action research at the beginning and now she displayed higher confidence in the process. Veronica identified action research as a professional development method when she said, "I like it as a professional development option. I've always liked learning how to make things better and I feel more in control with this."

One participant said she would not use this method due to her preference for workshops and conferences. Sherry conveyed her reasons by saying,

I know I am in the minority on this, but I probably would not use it again. Don't get me wrong, I did find some helpful information, but I just like going to workshops and conferences away from my classroom. I just don't feel like I can learn as much on my own.

This participant had reported in an earlier question that she was unable to collaborate as much on her topic. The lack of collaboration seemed to hinder her perspective of the method. Looking back at previous interviews, this was a continual issue for this participant. During the initial interview, this particular participant was also concerned with being alone in the classroom and not having enough support to implement action research. She did not have an assistant and was worried about not having enough help. The results for this individual may have been different had she had an assistant or had a similar topic with another participant that would have promoted more collaboration.

Perceived value of action research. Based on their interview answers and journal entries, the participants had an overall positive perception of action research. They were able to see changes in their environments based on the research they had conducted on their topics. This was evident in several of the answers discussed previously that were provided by the participants for question 9 in the focus group interview (Appendix T). Some of the participants reported feeling more confident and more in control of finding answers to their classroom issues on their own.

Increased confidence. Being able to find answers to their classroom issues creates a sense of empowerment and confidence. The empowerment they feel over their professional environment encourages them to seek out more professional development opportunities. This was confirmed since 11 out of 12 participants reported they would utilize action research again because they felt more confident during this study.

Sub-Question 3 Summary

Research sub-question 3 was focused on perceptions held by educators related to the value of action research. The question was: What is the perceived value, by the participants, of implementing action research as a professional development method? This question was answered during the last interview in the study, which was a focus group format (Appendix I). Questions 1 and 9 were designed to answer sub-question 3 about the participants' perception of implementing action research as a professional development method. This interview took place after each of the participants had completed their research on the topics and implemented their plan in their classrooms. The concepts that emerged during this interview were the following:

- Ideas Based on Research
- “Impressed With Myself”
- Not as Difficult
- Confidence
- Resourceful
- Help Myself
- Finding Answers
- Change of Attitude
- Not as Isolated
- Not as Time-Consuming
- Relationships
- Collaboration
- Thinking
- “I Feel Strong”
- Feeling in Control

The strongest concepts that emerged from the focus group interview were (a) collaboration, (b) being resourceful, (c) feeling in control and (d) thinking about future issues. Collaborating on ideas and working together was a positive aspect that was highlighted by the participants. Participants discussed feeling more like a team due to helping each other and using their staff meeting times for more productive discussions. Collaboration was noted as being enjoyable and something they desired to continue to engage in beyond this study.

Being resourceful in utilizing what they had available to them was the second most discussed issue. The participants talked about being able to find answers and knowing how to gain new information. Utilizing research to answer questions they had in their classroom was a concept that they admitted they had not utilized on a regular basis prior to this study. The participants also recognized each other as a valuable resource once they experienced collaboration at a higher level. They discussed talking to staff members that had conducted research in particular areas and being able to “pick their brain” on certain subjects. Feeling like they had a place to go for answers was a perception shared by many of the participants.

Feeling in control was another main concept that emerged during the focus group interview. This was closely related to feeling empowered. The participants described feeling strong and capable to take care of issues in their classroom. Seeing themselves as competent researchers created a sense of strength and stability that some had not felt before. This was also closely related to feelings of confidence because the participants demonstrated confidence when talking about feeling in control of their own issues.

Thinking was a word that continually came up in the discussion group. The participants talked about already thinking about other issues they had in their classroom and looking for new information that could make a difference. Analyzing their situations and finding answers was a new way of thinking about the process for some participants. Some expressed that the process made them think about how they did things before and how they can make a few changes to make things better.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided a description of the participants and the process by which early childhood educators implemented action research in their settings. The perceptions of the participants were a primary focus in the study to gain insight to the process. The model, the action to influence professional development model (Figure 2) was explained in depth as it related to each stage of change in perception. The changes in perception by the participants transitioned them to another level of professional practices. The model displayed the progression of professional practices as it led to the final influences on practices based on the perceptions of the participants. Additionally, I answered each of the research sub-questions and addressed the central question to the research study: How does the process of utilizing action research influence the professional development of early childhood educators as it relates to their professional practices?

Further research will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Chapter 5 will discuss the findings further as they relate to theory and the theoretical framework on which the study is based. The implications and limitations of the study will be discussed along with recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

In this final chapter, I present how the findings in this study relate to the theoretical framework for which it is based along with how it compliments previous research in the areas of action research, professional development and collaboration. A description of the implications and limitations of the study will be discussed. In addition, the recommendations for future research will complete the chapter.

Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this systematic grounded theory study was to gain insight into the process of utilizing action research as a professional development method in early childhood environments by focusing on the perceptions of the early childhood educators as they implemented in their setting. Grounded theory provided a method for analyzing the meanings and interpretations of experiences by constantly comparing data until a full understanding of the phenomena occurred (Cooney, 2011). For the purpose of this study, action research was utilized as a method for professional development and was embedded in the work environment.

The focus was to answer the central research question: How does the process of utilizing action research influence the professional development of early childhood educators as it relates to their professional practices? In answering this guiding research question, a model was developed to summarize the process that took place during the implementation of action research and the alteration of professional practices were identified as a result. The model, the action to influence professional development model

(Figure 2), was grounded in data collected while observing and interviewing participants in their early childhood settings. As noted in the model, four areas emerged as the main influences on professional practices: (a) metacognition, (b) empowerment, (c) resourcefulness and (d) collaboration. These influences were the answer to the central question about how the process of utilizing action research influences professional development as it relates to professional practices as they each increased during the process of implementing action research. The participants indicated through interviews, observations and journal entries a change in their professional practices in those areas. To further support the answer to the central research question, three research sub-questions were examined to provide additional data.

The first research sub-question related to the perceptions of action research held by the participants prior to gaining significant knowledge of the process. The purpose in gathering this information was to compare thoughts and perceptions about the process prior to training and implementation to thoughts and perceptions after applying the new knowledge in the early childhood setting. The participants overall did not have a significant amount of knowledge about about action research prior to beginning the study, but indicated through the initial interview that the term incited a sense of anxiety based on the unknown. After exposure to training and through active exploration, the majority of the participants had a more favorable view of action research at the end of the study.

The second research sub-question related to the perceptions of collaboration held by the participants during the process of implementation of action research in the early

childhood environment. The purpose in gathering this information was to gain insight into the perceptions of the collaborative nature of the process; to gain insight into what made collaboration conducive and if collaboration had changed since beginning the process. Collaboration was not a new concept to the participants and they provided ideas of what would make collaboration more conducive in their environment. The majority of the participants expressed benefiting from collaborative efforts and identified collaboration as the strongest element in the process that led to a change in professional practices.

The third research sub-question related to the perceived value of action research as a professional development method was designed to gain the perspective of the participants during the process of implementation in the early childhood classroom. The purpose in gathering this information was to gain insight into whether or not action research would be an option for future professional development. The majority of the participants, 11 out of 12, indicated they would utilize action research in the future and had a favorable view of how action research had been conducted as a professional development model in this study. Experiencing success in the implementation led to the participants having a greater sense of empowerment related to professional development. The participants indicated they were thinking more about how to find answers for their classrooms and enjoyed the collaborative efforts during the process. The area that emerged that was not anticipated related to being more resourceful. Participants indicated that the process of implementing action research had made them more aware of ways to be more resourceful in relation to professional development.

Final Interpretation of Data

Direct interpretation of the data is the final step in analyzing the data collected during the study. The interpretation of data is the process of dissecting each concept and drawing meaning from them to form a new theory. The process involved taking apart the information, looking for relationships and meaning and then reconstructing it into a more meaningful format (Nikander, 2008). The data collected were in the form of interviews, observations and journal entries. Each form of data contributed to the final interpretation of how the information could be utilized in future research and in other settings.

Interview data. The interview data produced the greatest amount of information in answering each of the research sub-questions. An example of a participant's interview is provided in Appendix U. The interviews were scheduled throughout the process of the study and provided insight into how the perceptions of the participants had shifted during each phase. The final interview was in the form of a focus group interview. During this interview, the process had been completed and the participants revealed how their professional practices had been altered through the process of implementing action research as a professional development method. An excerpt from the focus group interview is provided in Appendix V. The data collected from the final, focus group interview was utilized to answer the central question of the study regarding how the process of utilizing action research had influenced the professional development of early childhood educators as it related to their professional practices.

Observation data. Observation data brought insight into the participant's perspective early in the process of implementing action research. The information

collected provided a basis for comparison once the perceptions of the participants began to shift during the process of implementation. During this time, the perceptions were rapidly changing and the observations assisted in recording information about quickly emerging themes. An example of the classroom observation using the observation protocol is provided in Appendix W. The observation protocol template (Appendix J) provided an organized framework for recording information during the frequent classroom visits. During each visit, the template was used to record information about technical assistance needed, any noticeable collaboration, and the progress of implementation of action research in the environment.

Journal data. Being aware of biases and preconceived notions were critical to the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Journals were utilized during the study for the participants to record emerging thoughts while in the classroom. A guide for journal entries was provided as part of the training handouts (Appendix A). Verbal promptings were given after the training and during the classroom visits to encourage the participants to record their thoughts in their journals. The concepts from the journals confirmed the concepts that emerged during the interviews and classroom observations. An example of memoing from an excerpt of a journal is provided in Appendix X. My biases and emerging thoughts were recorded in my own journal to protect the trustworthiness of the study findings (Appendix B).

Discussion of Findings Related to Theory

In addition to answering the research guiding questions, the intent for the research for this systematic grounded theory study was to add to existing theory while generating a

new model to be utilized as a professional development method. Grounded theory was chosen for its inductive nature to allow for new concepts to emerge from the data collected (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). A theory was developed in the form of a model through the constant comparison of data to explain the emerging patterns (Charmaz, 2006). The model, the action to influence professional development model (Figure 2), can be deployed to assist in future professional development opportunities as a guide to influence the professional practices of educators.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory Revisited

The action to influence professional development model (Figure 2) is aligned with the conceptual framework for the study, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory (Figure 1). Kolb (1984) provided a theory that encourages learners to put theory into practice. The active nature of this theory compliments the findings of this study with an emphasis on exploration and reflection. Kolb (1984) highlighted learning as an active process that is grounded in experience and reflection. The social nature of Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984) matches the collaborative nature of this study and highlighted the interactions between the learner and the environment. Kolb (1984) provided a basis for the qualitative design of this study and specifically aligned with the grounded theory approach. Both provided a complimentary framework to allow for further research in examining the process of implementing action research as a professional development model.

Kolb (1984) designed a process of learning that takes into consideration the perceptions of the participants. As stipulated in his theory, Kolb (1984) prescribes the

process of beginning with an idea and actively experimenting with the idea to reach a conclusion. The learning model transitions through four areas in the cycle: (a) experiencing, (b) reflecting, (c) conceptualizing and (d) actively experimenting (Kolb, 1984). This study was aligned as it transitioned through each area of Kolb's learning cycle in similar ways (Kolb, 1984).

Initially, in Kolb's learning theory (1984), the concrete idea provokes a feeling while experiencing the phenomena. In relation to the study, the participants experienced learning about action research as a new topic and implementing the process in their classrooms. During this time, the participants were receiving technical assistance through classroom observations and recording thoughts in their journals about the experience. The process of implementing action research in this study aligns with Kolb's (1984) learning theory where learners formulate new ideas through the process of experiencing a phenomenon. The next area in the cycle is reflecting.

During the reflective cycle, learners make a conscious effort to reflect back about their experience (Kolb, 1984). In relation to the study, the participants were guided to reflect and had several opportunities for reflection about what they were experiencing. In addition to their journals, the participants had the opportunity to reflect on the process as they collaborated with other participants and shared insights during the follow-up, open-ended interview. The process of the participants reflecting on teaching practices through interviews and recording additional thoughts in the journals in this study aligns with Kolb's (1984) learning theory where learners reflect on their experiences with a

phenomenon. Reflection leads to the next area of conceptualizing about what they have experienced and organizing their ideas into models or theory (Kolb, 1984).

During the conceptualization cycle, learners are organizing their thoughts about a process to make overall assumptions (Kolb, 1984). In relation to the study, the participants were guided to conceptualize about the process during the focus group interview. Participants were asked about their perceptions of the process and how it had changed since the beginning of the study. The participants provided insight into how their initial thoughts of the process had altered and how it influenced their professional practices. The process of the participants being asked to think about concepts they were experiencing and provide feedback about those thoughts aligns with Kolb's (1984) learning theory where learners form new ideas and concepts based on analyzing a situation or phenomenon. The changed perceptions lead to the last area in the learning theory, which is active experimentation (Kolb, 1984).

During active experimentation, the learner is testing new situations or making plans to try out the new concepts in future situations (Kolb, 1984). In relation to the study, some of the participants indicated they were thinking about how they could use the process to help with other issues. Shannon stated, "I'm already thinking about how I can use it for another issue I am having in my class." Other participants can visualize being a researcher and better teacher. Wanda said, "I see myself being a researcher. I feel strong." Molly amplified that idea by stating, "...it was nice to be able to help myself rather than relying on somebody else to tell me what to do." All but one participant stated they would use action research again to solve future classroom issues. The process of the

participants thinking about how they will use the new skills and making future plans about utilizing action research aligns with Kolb's (1984) learning theory where learners move beyond an experience to experiment with new concepts or to make future plans.

This study followed the pattern of Kolb's theory (1984) and followed a similar process in experimenting with an idea. The study, like Kolb (1984), focuses on the participant's perceptions during the process. The initial perceptions of an idea can change through experience, which leads to a solid understanding that can be utilized later by the individual. Kolb's experiential learning model (1984) displays a continual cycle of exploration. This study represents a similar idea in that once an individual changes their perception about something it leads to potential lasting influences on professional practice. Most participants indicated their perception about action research had changed through active exploration of the topic as a result of this study. These perceptions will be explored in more detail later in this chapter.

Supporting Existing Research

In addition to aligning with Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984), the findings in this study add to the current research in the areas of professional development, action research and collaboration. The existing research in these areas neglected to make a significant connection between these topics, which represented a gap in the research. More research was needed to bridge these areas together to form a new theory for effectively implementing action research in the early childhood environment. The existing research supported further exploration of the topics.

Professional development. Professional development was identified in previous research as directly linked to quality teaching and environments (Malm, 2009). However, as contributors to their own professional development, educators have been underestimated (Berry, Norton & Byrd, 2007). Job-embedded opportunities were recognized as being the most beneficial formats due to relevance and immediacy of application (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012). It is difficult for educators to be away from the classroom and opportunities may only come once or twice a year. Professional development that is job-embedded offers an ongoing opportunity for educators to learn new techniques and gain strategies for handling classroom issues. The immediate access to issues, collaborative discussions and continual feedback offers a more conducive environment for applying appropriate professional development practices in the classroom (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012).

In this study, professional development was the premise of approaching the sites to be a part of the study. Educators continually need to participate in professional development opportunities as requirements for their job. Professional development options can sometimes be limited based on the time they are offered and the cost associated with participating. The majority of the participants in this study embraced the opportunity for onsite training and technical assistance. However, one participant preferred training away from the facility and classroom. This study highlights job-embedded training, which is a type of professional development that had limited exposure in previous research. Training and technical assistance was administered during work hours and in the teaching environment. According to previous research, the onsite,

job-embedded group training provided almost immediate results (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012). In contrast, the individual, offsite training provided less influence on lasting changes in professional practices (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012). According to previous research, having the opportunity to apply new ideas from professional development and utilize them immediately in the professional environment motivates learners to continue to seek new knowledge (Baran & Cagiltay, 2010). The technical assistance provided in this study prompted a more immediate application of the training and gave the participants the confidence to try the new techniques. During one of the observations in the classroom, Kristy expressed she had “a better handle on things” since she was able to put some of the strategies into action. She had expressed an earlier hesitation about not knowing how to begin. After having an opportunity to gain assistance with questions and try some of the techniques, Kristy expressed more confidence in the process and her ability. Job-embedded training was not an initial focus in this study, but it became more prominent as the process of implementing action research was observed during the data collection phase of the study.

Action research. Action research was a topic focus in the study. However, it was not a new topic in research. Action research has been an educational topic for many years, but its relevance as a professional development model in an early childhood environment had not been heavily explored in existing research. Action research emerged as a catalyst for professional development with its connection to collaboration. Collaboration was a repetitive theme throughout the research focused on action research in the classroom (Newton & Burgess, 2008).

In this study, action research was the method of professional development that was implemented on-site through training and technical assistance. As the emphasis of the professional development model, action research served as a method for the participants to improve issues in their classroom through research and collaboration. The perceptions of the participants about action research was a focus of research sub-question 1 primarily due to the interest in identifying if participants had preconceived ideas about the topic. The participant's perceptions about action research were changed after they had the opportunity to learn more about procedures in the method through training and after they were able to experiment with strategies in their classroom during implementation. During this study, action research was a catalyst to promote interactions among the participants and led the majority to a further propensity to engage in this type of professional development method in the future.

Collaboration. Collaboration was noted in previous research as being difficult to organize (O'Mara & Gutierrez, 2010). The nature of the position of the educator does not allow ample time or opportunity to share ideas through collaboration. Job responsibilities and busy schedules prevent extended times for educators to meet and talk about classroom issues. If collaborative efforts are made, it is usually during scheduled meeting times away from the classroom and other items can dominate the meeting agenda. This was noted during the data collection for this study. In addition, collaboration is not always easy to organize in the education environments with younger students. However, administrators can advocate for more accessibility to collaborative endeavors for educators (Dufour & Mattos, 2013). The existing research highlighted technology as a

way to bridge the gap for collaboration with colleagues (Duncan-Howell, 2010).

Technology can assist in a variety of ways to share information among educators.

In this study, collaboration was a focused topic during the open-ended, follow-up interview (Appendix H). Data was gathered from the participants through the interview, observations and from journal entries about their perception of collaboration.

Collaboration was more difficult for some of the participants based on their job responsibilities or lack of opportunities to talk to colleagues. However, the personal connection was noted as a positive aspect when participants were interviewed during this study, which is lacking when utilizing technology only. Collaborative efforts among the participants were the basis for one of the changes that took place in their professional practices.

Contributing New Theory to Identified Gaps in Research

The purpose of engaging in grounded theory is to add to the current body of research literature and to move toward filling in the gaps identified in previous research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). This study focused on describing a process of implementing action research in an early childhood environment as a form of professional development. The description of the process and perceptions of the participants specifically assist to fill in the gaps of non-existing research in the area of implementing action research in the early childhood environment. However, the gaps identified in Meister's (2010) research in relation to the educators' perceptions of professional development were another area that was covered in this study. The participants' perception of the process was the primary focus of the data collected.

In addition, the study adds to the research literature provided by O'Mara and Gutierrez (2010) and West (2011) in relation to collaboration in professional development. West (2011) had suggested more dialogue with educators to reveal thoughts and concerns about collaborative relationships based on their experiences. West (2011) suggested educators engage in collaborative research as a meaningful form of professional development and sighted action research as a possible model. This study implemented action research as a professional development model, which enabled me to study the collaborative nature of the process. Action research can be administered on an individual basis, but it lends itself to a collaborative process. In this study, the participants were not instructed to form collaborative teams initially to explore similar topics. However, as a part of the study process, the participants naturally formed research teams to assist one another in finding information about topics that were relevant for all involved. This led to further facilitation for collaborating on similar topics. This adds to the existing research and serves to fill in the gaps left from the research conducted by West (2011) related to collaboration as a part of professional development practices. Collaboration emerged as a major influence in the change in professional practices among the participants in this study.

O'Mara and Gutierrez (2010) focused on the challenges related to collaboration and the lack of time for educators to engage in professional development opportunities. O'Mara and Gutierrez (2010) focused on barriers to professional development in their research. This present study added to research about ways to eliminate one of the barriers to engaging in professional development, which was the lack of time to participate in

professional development events. Filling in the gap identified by O'Mara and Gutierrez (2010), this study provided a possible solution for a lack of time to grow professionally. Job-embedded training and technical assistance led to increased knowledge and a change in professional practices in the majority of the participants in this study. These findings can be added to the research conducted by Kapachtsi and Kakana (2012) to promote more job-embedded models in administering professional development.

Job-embedded professional development was an area of research that was previously not anticipated to be as significant when beginning this study. The study design included on-site training and daily monitoring, but the area of job-embedded training was not the primary focus of this study. Regardless of the initial intent, this study revealed perceptions about job-embedded training through the focus group interview. The participants indicated they were able to apply strategies immediately after training with the assistance of the on-site technical support. The findings in this study, combined with the earlier efforts of Kapachtsi and Kakana (2012), advances research supporting more job-embedded models to alleviate challenges related to lack of time for professional development.

The findings in this study were translated into a new theory in the form of a model for professional development. The action to influence professional development model (Figure 2) demonstrates the process and methods of implementing action research. Each new stage of implementation led to an alteration in the perspective of the participants. The final influences, representing a change in professional practices, are shown in the model in the green boxes (Figure 2). These influences, increased

metacognition, feelings of empowerment, increased resourcefulness and the proneness toward collaboration were noticeable changes during the course of this study to the participant's professional practices.

Through an increase in metacognition, the participants are thinking more about their own professional development and how they will utilize the methods they learned in future situations (Ivers, 2012). Metacognition can lead to more engagement in the professional development process and to the application of the new knowledge (Martinez, 2006). Metacognition is a necessary component to move the participants in professional development to higher levels of thought and application (Ivers, 2012). The higher level of thought about the process leads to higher levels of pride and sense of accomplishment. Ivers (2012) asserts that higher levels of critical thinking will occur among educators when they have the opportunity to reflect on practices and explore areas where they still have questions. This "thinking about thinking" strategy leads educators to reflect on their current understandings and create new levels of understanding through personal and group reflection (Ivers, 2012, p. 51). They are analyzing their classroom situations and making decisions to research particular areas.

Making decisions about their own environment led to an increased feeling of empowerment and control over their own situations. Empowerment comes when someone feels in control of areas that are directly linked to them. According to research, empowering teachers to become leaders in their own classrooms will lead them to become advocates in the field (Diana, 2011). By taking an active role in their professional development, teachers feel confident to make changes in their environment and to seek

out more opportunities. The sense of empowerment gives them confidence to try new things and a feeling of being in control of their professional environments (Bradley-Levine et al., 2009). According to Malm (2009), educators need to feel a part of the process of professional development, which leads to higher self-efficacy. By taking such an active role in their own professional development, teachers feel empowered to make changes in their classroom and beyond (Diana, 2011).

The participants began to utilize items and people around them to solve their classroom issues. By them seeking out new resources within their own environment, the collaboration among the participants increased naturally and assisted some in forming collaborative teams for research. In the literature review, a lack of resources was a concern for some educators. Without additional resources for the educators to examine and manipulate, they become more passive learners. Schweitzer and Stephenson (2008) describe resources as not being costly, but more effective for what is trying to be achieved. The findings in this study revealed the participants were utilizing each other as a resource by sharing ideas and classroom resources. Increased resourcefulness was an area that was not anticipated as an outcome of this study based on previous research in this area.

Collaboration was one of the repetitive themes that emerged during the literature review in the articles noting action research as a professional development method. Participants were using collaboration to share ideas and as a form of accountability when implementing strategies for a collective purpose (Newton & Burgess, 2008). Collaboration led to a sense of teacher empowerment because they were able to voice

opinions and share ideas. In an article outlining the benefits of collaboration, action research was described as beneficial because it “empowers teachers to construct knowledge and make it available to others, for their own professional benefit and the benefit of children and families” (Adams & Warner, 2001, p. 27). The collaborative nature of action research led to positive changes in the learning environments as a whole.

Earlier during the literature review, collaborative environments were cited as one of the main reasons educators continued with more demanding models of professional development and led to sustaining involvement beyond the required timeline (O’Mara & Gutierrez, 2010). Sharing and reflection were themes that emerged in some of the research (O’Mara & Gutierrez, 2010). According to O’Mara and Gutierrez (2010), the collaborative nature of the work led to more professional satisfaction and a revitalized view of professional development. A collaborative model ensures the approaches will most likely continue in the environment and lead to a higher level of learning in the future (O’Mara & Gutierrez, 2010). The findings in this study add to existing research about collaborative settings being identified as an effective strategy for implementing training and professional development (O’Mara & Gutierrez, 2010).

The influences described above are results of new additions to research in the areas of professional development and will assist in future decision-making about professional opportunities for educators. The study utilized a systematic approach to describe a process through a model that emerged from the data collection in an early childhood environment. This approach allowed data to inform the development of theory in the form of a model to be utilized in future early childhood environments (Glaser &

Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The thick description of the process allowed me to form patterns that eventually led to the creation of a collaborative model for professional development (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The description was also a way to establish the transferability of the results and the applicability to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Study Implications

In grounded theory design, the researcher is immersed in the systematic study of the process and this immersion produces a significant amount of qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The analysis of the data transforms the abundance of descriptive data into an understandable explanation and in the case of grounded theory design it translates into a new theory (Mills, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). The qualitative data analysis techniques executed in this systematic grounded theory study were describing, memoing, classifying with codes and interpreting the data. During the study, the participants were the authors of their own stories and the stories they told gave greater insight into how action research can be utilized in future settings.

After the process of analyzing the data, practical and methodological implications were made in order to disseminate the information to be used beyond the study. The influences, which emerged at the end of the study, provide areas for educators to continue to explore as a means to enhance their professional development practices. The influences are as follows: (a) metacognition, (b) empowerment, (c) resourcefulness and (d) collaboration.

Metacognition

Known as a higher level of thought about a process, metacognition leads to more engagement in professional development and leads to the application of new knowledge (Martinez, 2006). It is an alternative thought pattern about a particular subject. The gap in previous research was the absence of how to move educators toward higher levels of metacognition. Applying new knowledge is important, but thinking about the process leads to a change in the way new knowledge is approached. Metacognition is necessary to move individuals that are participating in professional development to higher levels of thought and application (Ivers, 2012). The higher level of thought about the process or subject most likely leads to higher levels of pride and a sense of accomplishment as it relates to professional development. Ivers (2012) asserts that when educators have the opportunity to reflect on practices and explore new areas then higher levels of critical thinking occurs. This “thinking about thinking” strategy leads educators toward reflection and this increases their understanding of the subject through analysis (Ivers, 2012, p. 51).

The findings in this study provide practical implications for educators who plan professional development opportunities. Simply receiving new information is not enough to lead to a permanent change in professional practices. Opportunities for discussion and reflection need to be a part of the method of acquiring new knowledge. The participants provided insight into the benefits of organizing discussions about certain topics and providing ways for individuals to express ideas without speaking up in a group. When a new concept was learned, the participants were encouraged to explore the topic further for relevance and to write about their understanding and thoughts in a journal. If a new

concept is not revisited or applied then the likelihood of making significant changes in the learning environment is improbable (Tasker, Johnson & Davis, 2010). Having opportunities to think about new ways to apply the information validates the professional development process for the learner (Baran & Cagiltay, 2010). This was an outcome in this study. The participants were encouraged to brainstorm initial ideas and to reflect on research findings throughout the process. As a part of the professional development model in this study, reflection led to higher levels of metacognition. As a methodological implication, providing ways to encourage reflection during a process will make significant impacts on the positive acceptance of a professional development model in other settings.

Empowerment

Educators need to feel a part of the process of professional development in order to lead to higher self-efficacy (Malm, 2009). If they feel confident and empowered during the process of engaging in professional development then it will encourage them to seek out similar professional development opportunities. The sense of empowerment leads to a confidence of being in control of the professional environment and to try new things (Bradley-Levine et al., 2009). The gap in the previous research was identifying particular professional development models that would lead educators to a feeling of empowerment. Malm (2009) indicated that educators want to feel like they have a part in the decision-making of topics to be explored. That is one small element of what would lead to a true sense of empowerment. Simply choosing a topic does not guarantee that an educator will feel like they are a part of the process.

The findings in this study provide practical implications of what leads to a sense of empowerment and provides a structure that can be applied in other settings. The participants indicated they liked having a structure to the process of applying action research. The structure enables them to make a plan and have a starting point for the research. At first, in this study, when they did not fully understand the concept it brought anxiety and uncertainty. However, once they had a better understanding they felt confident and impressed with their ability to apply the new information. The sense of empowerment increased as they progressed through the steps provided during training to implement action research in their classrooms. Providing a structure or template, like the action research process (Appendix D), to follow gives a sense of security when implementing a new process. Having this structure promotes empowerment once the individual experiences success. As a methodological implication, the structure provided by those administering professional development should be a focus when planning trainings, such as the training utilized in this study (Appendix A), to contribute to a sense of empowerment by providing a plan to follow.

The findings in this study provide implications related to encouraging teachers as researchers to explore topics as needed. In the traditional model of professional development, topics are not always related to the area of greatest need in the classroom. Many times choices are made based on schedules or a comfort of exploring a topic that is familiar. In this study, participants were encouraged to choose a topic to explore that aligned with the area in their classroom where they felt more challenged. In the beginning, this was not a comfortable choice for some of the participants. However, once

the participants were able to see that with very little effort they could locate research that would assist them in making a plan of action to conquer the issue, their concerns were eased. In addition, when the participants were able to share their concerns with others and brainstorm ideas, they were able to share the workload related to planning and implementing the solution.

Resourcefulness

The lack of resources was cited in previous research as an obstacle to professional development. According to research, in order to become engaged in learning something new the educator needs to have access to a variety of resources they can reference and study during the process (Mills, 2011). Resources were identified as a variety of items including books, articles, artifacts, videos, outlines, and online information. The idea was that without engaging resources, educators become more passive learners (Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008). The gap in the previous research was in providing ways to recognize valuable resources that are already available to the educator. Mills (2011) suggested a collaborative effort between educators and administrators in deciding what resources would be necessary to achieve the desired level of knowledge. However, no emphasis was on utilizing current resources.

The study provided practical implications that can be applied in most educational settings. There are times when resources need to be purchased, however as revealed in this study the participants admitted to not utilizing the resources available to them. Some resources that proved to be the most valuable were the discussions between participants about topics where they could exchange information and knowing where to look for

answers to questions that would arise in the classroom. Access to simple technology, such as having access to the internet, allowed participants to be able to locate up-to-date information about particular topics. Using a few key strategies like sharing research among the participant group and gaining support through sharing ideas that had already been attempted in another classroom, led to a shift in the participant's ideas about available resources. This was not an expected finding especially since the research conducted prior to beginning the study was leading to utilizing more technology in the learning environment and encouraged exposure to a variety of resources. Educators tend to look for the next item that vendors can provide to gain access to new information. This study has made me think differently about resources and the money spent by educational institutions on the next popular product. The methodological implications for those planning professional development opportunities, such as administrators, would be to initially take a closer look at what is already provided in the learning environment and then plan professional development around utilizing the available resources. A noticeable change in the participants that were a part of the study was that they became more aware of what was available to them. They just needed time to explore the resources in order to utilize them. This would be an additional implication to reintroduce educators to the abundance of resources already available to them prior to making decisions to purchase new resources for the environment.

Collaboration

Collaboration among colleagues has been identified in research as an effective strategy for implementing professional development (O'Mara & Gutierrez, 2010).

Collaboration was mentioned in almost every area that discussed professional development in the review of literature. It is not a new idea that when individuals have the opportunity to work together it brings a higher dimension of learning. Knowing this encouraged me to seek out a collaborative model to implement professional development. Collaboration among colleagues leads to a higher level of understanding about a topic through active discussion and the exchange of ideas. According to Meister (2010), learning environments that encouraged collaborative settings produced higher outcomes for the individuals involved. Collaborative environments were also cited in previous research as one of the main reasons educators continued with more demanding models of professional development (O'Mara & Gutierrez, 2010). The collaboration led to continual involvement beyond the required time set for the development (O'Mara & Gutierrez, 2010). According to O'Mara and Gutierrez (2010), collaboration led to a higher level of professional satisfaction and a revitalized view of professional development opportunities. Among all of the research related to collaboration, the gap that was identified was related to the area of teachers as researchers and ways to encourage more research-based practices.

Collaboration was not a new concept, but the study provided an awareness of how to make collaboration more conducive in an early childhood environment. The participants shared what they liked and did not like during collaborative sessions that can be utilized by others when planning professional development activities. The one participant that indicated they would not utilize action research as a professional development method cited the lack of collaboration they experienced as one the reasons

for making that decision. For that particular participant, if the collaborative environment had been more conducive in her situation, it is likely she would have had a more favorable view of the process. The methodological implication acquired from the study would be to make collaboration a priority and to use the perceptions of what makes collaborating more comfortable as a basis for planning future collaborative efforts. Administrators can support educators in making the most valuable use of their time while on the job to collaborate with their colleagues and sharing information. Utilizing a portion of a staff meeting time can provide the needed amount of time to build collaborative relationships that can be continued beyond the meeting.

Study Limitations

Every study has limitations. However, it is important to identify the limitations in relation to the design and in the context of how those limitations are a threat to the transferability of the results to other environments. The role of the researcher is to take steps in limiting the influences of the study limitations for the benefit of the applicability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Qualitative Design

The qualitative design of the study was specifically chosen due to its explorative nature and ability to go beyond just a compilation of facts. Qualitative methods allow the researcher to enter into the participants' environment to gain insight into their perspective (Charmaz, 2006; Andrews, 2012). However, with qualitative research there are some limitations associated with this method. With the design relying more on the researcher building rapport with the participants and the amount of data that were required to be

collected and organized, it leaves room for human error (Andrews, 2012). It takes a great deal of time and effort to analyze the data to ensure accuracy and transferability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide helpful criteria in making sure the research is sound and free from error. The four areas to assess soundness of the qualitative research are the following: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability and (d) confirmability.

Credibility is established in a qualitative study when there are rich descriptions of the setting, participants, procedures and interactions. Transferability is established in a study when the findings can be generalized to other situations and settings by providing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Dependability is achieved through an accurate description of any changes that occur during the study to explain any shifts or alterations to the data or data collection. Confirmability is established in a study when safeguards are in place to secure the objectivity of the reporting of findings. This can be achieved through member checking and recording biases in a journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I utilized peer debriefing, member checking, rich description, triangulation of data and kept a journal to record any personal bias as safeguards for trustworthiness. I chose qualitative research due to the nature of the topic and wanting to achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. I utilized Lincoln and Guba's (1985) strategies to facilitate a more trustworthy design in this study in order to advance research in the area of professional development in the early childhood environment. By following the guide provided by Lincoln and Guba (1985), researchers can gain higher levels of trustworthiness related to their qualitative research.

Trustworthiness of data. The triangulation of data was used to add to the dependability of the study. In addition, peer debriefing, member checking, and rich descriptions were utilized to create further trustworthiness in the study. An audit trail was maintained to document the training, onsite technical assistance, peer debriefing sessions and points of member checking. The audit trail is located in Appendix Y. Generalizations were made from analyzing the data to be able to present the information in a format that could be applied in other settings. A final analysis was conducted after reviewing any bias toward the findings and the implications were made for use of the data.

Small Sample Size

An additional limitation of the study is the size of the sample being studied. Some look at qualitative studies and notice smaller sample sizes and equate that to not being as thorough. However, it is quite the opposite. In a smaller study, the amount of data collected lends itself to complete saturation of the topic. In relation to grounded theory, new concepts emerge from the data collected from participants. For that reason, grounded theory has been identified to be effective with a small organizational unit where theory is generated from evidence collected during personal observations allowing new concepts to emerge (Bore, 2006). In this study, the perceptions of the participants were a key element. The process of data collection included a consistent presence of the researcher in the environment to observe the participants. According to Pilnick and Swift (2010), a small sample size cultivates focused data collection in qualitative studies. The lead teachers in the two learning environments were the primary focus of the exploration. By focusing on the just the lead teachers, it limited the number of participants to a number

that was more conducive to qualitative data collection and ensured that the primary focus was on participants directly responsible for classroom implementation. The smaller sample size promoted more collaboration among the participants during focus group interviews and allowed more focused data collection through observations of experiences and analysis of data (Swartz & Triscari, 2011).

Study Timeframe

Another limitation in terms of the study is related to the timeframe in which the study was conducted. In order to gain the most from the participants based on their perceptions, a constant exposure to the environment was deemed necessary in this research design. A consistent presence in the early childhood environment allowed for more interactions and exposure to participants' experiences. A study situation over a longer period of time with less frequency of visitation may not have produced the same findings simply due to missing emerging concepts. Once knowledge was acquired in a particular area, the thought patterns and processes began to change rapidly in participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It required a continual and flexible schedule in the environment in order to collect data as it emerged. This timeframe required me to spend more time submerged in the learning environment to gather data as it rapidly changed in order to not miss any new emerging concepts (Charmaz, 2006). With this qualitative approach, data collection was streamlined and analysis of data utilized a constant comparative approach. In addition, building rapport was essential. This also required a condensed amount of time engrossed in the environment rather than observing sporadically. Constant exposure is more effective and leads to more quality data (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012). In addition,

the constant exposure allowed for sudden shifts in the interpretation of the data, which ultimately strengthened the study by showing the data was not forced (Charmaz, 2006).

All of the information gained during the study from the observations and interviews was useful information in formulating the new concept of the Action to Influence Professional Development Model. This model can assist with future decisions about professional development and the use of action research as a viable option in early childhood settings and beyond.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study provided a new perspective on influences leading to an alteration in professional practices. The four areas of influence on professional practices identified in the study (metacognition, empowerment, resourcefulness and collaboration) can be utilized in future research studies to further determine the generalization of the findings in other early childhood settings. The action to influence professional development model (Figure 2) could be administered in other levels of early childhood settings to gain a deeper intuitive understanding of the process and its ability to influence further changes in professional practice among participants. In addition, using a larger sample size with a variety of sites would provide opportunities for broader perspectives in the areas of professional development, action research and collaboration.

Prominent Topics

Two prominent areas emerged during the study that would add to current research in the field and enhance the findings of this study. The first area identified as a contributing factor in the success of implementing professional development was the role

of the administrator. Having the authority over decisions about professional development, this role is an important aspect of what educators are exposed to during training. The other area that emerged as a possible research focus during the process of data collection and analysis was the idea of increasing the resourcefulness of the educators through awareness and by identifying resources already available in each setting. This area circles back to one of the initial ideas for this research in that professional development can be costly and it can benefit educational facilities to explore alternative options. Each area brought questions to my mind about how they could influence the professional practices of other educators beyond this study.

Administrators' role in professional development. The administrators at each site in the study supported the participants in varying ways, which contributed to the final perceptions due to the positive influence they had during this study. Administrators were noted throughout the study as being a support system for the professional development of the participants. Between the two sites, one administrator had an even greater influence based on being more involved in the process as a sign of support to the staff. The role of the administrator has been recognized in previous research as an important aspect in professional development (Dufour & Mattos, 2013). This study advanced that idea, but could benefit from further research that was specifically focused on the administrators' role in the process.

Identification of resources. In relation to resources used for professional development, one of the initial premises of the research for this study was to look for ways to make professional development more cost effective for educational institutions.

Resourcefulness emerged as one of the main influences in the change of professional practices among the participants. This area was not anticipated as an area of focus, but it emerged from the data from the participants. In previous research, Mills (2011) had suggested a collaborative effort between administrators and educators in deciding what resources would be needed to achieve the desired level of teaching and learning. Schweitzer and Stephenson (2008) offered some low cost options to utilize as resources such as role-playing, creating plans and applying new knowledge in classroom scenarios. Action research can be included in the low cost options due to the sharing of resources among the participants and active planning related to collaboration. This study has highlighted the concept of utilizing what is available in the environment as an initial resource, which will achieve one of the earlier intentions of the study to provide a low cost option to professional development. The participants indicated they were more aware of resources that were readily available to them and expressed utilizing resources in a different way. The idea of rediscovering resources that have never been used or used sparingly could be an additional way to save professional development funds to be utilized in other ways to benefit students, which could warrant more research in this area.

Other topics in research. During the literature review, there were several topic areas that were relevant to the area of professional development that would support further research beyond the two just discussed. The following areas also emerged during the review: (a) relevant training, (b) engaged educators, (c) resistance to change, (d) reluctance to interfere in professional practices and (e) lack of time. These areas were noted in previous research as either being supportive or being a challenge to appropriate

professional development. Although these topics were not as pronounced as the role of the administrator and utilizing resources, they still are important contributors to the overall understanding of appropriate professional development.

Relevant training. In previous research, it was emphasized that professional development opportunities should prepare educators to handle issues in their classrooms that were unpredictable (Kennedy, 2006). Professional development experiences were identified as needing to be relevant in order to move educators from passively acquiring knowledge to the rigorous application of knowledge (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2012). In this study, the topics were relevant to the participants' classroom needs. Although this was not a focus of this research study, further research could be conducted to compare the level of change in professional practices when relevant topics are introduced in training versus pre-planned topics.

Engaged educators. Another topic evident in previous research was the importance of engaging educators in the professional development process. Intrator and Kunzman (2006) emphasized the importance of providing more meaningful professional development for educators to alleviate feelings of being overwhelmed and disconnected. The research supported redirecting professional development approaches toward reflection and renewal to instill passion and clarity for educators while learning new ideas. Dufour and Mattos (2013) revealed the practice of engaging educators in their professional development process would enhance the learning environment for all involved. By collectively creating a vision and working together to carry out the vision can ensure teaching teams are focused on the same goals for the learning environment.

Although this study was not primarily focused on articulating a vision and translating that vision into better teaching practices, the participants did focus on engagement with colleagues through collaboration. This allowed them to experience higher levels of satisfaction during the process of implementing action research.

Resistance to change. A topic covered in previous research that was less evident in this study was resistance to change. According to Guskey and Kwang Suk (2009), educators can hinder the effectiveness of professional development knowledge when they are not in control of choosing a topic or they do not see merit in applying the new information. The majority of the participants in this study were open to the new ideas. One participant may have had some preconceived ideas, but during the times I visited in her classroom she expressed wanting to find a solution to her classroom issue. The area that hindered that participant from becoming as involved was the lack of opportunities to collaborate. However, resistance to change may have been an issue if this study had been administered using a larger sample size. Some educators may feel they have reached the highest level of knowledge and may not be open to new practices (Guskey & Kwang Suk, 2009). Since this was an area covered by previous research it could be a focus in a future study with a larger sample size to identify how to overcome this challenge to professional development.

Reluctance to interfere. A further topic that could be explored in future research is related to a reluctance to interfere with the professional practices of others. Mills (2011) identified new administrators having a difficult time in interfering with the professional practices of more experienced teachers. By sacrificing the quality of

professional development, some administrators choose the least resisted option of allowing educators to continue in their comfortable ways of teaching. This was not the case in this study with the administrators. They were a constant support to the staff, but they had clear ideas for topics and purposely guided teachers in particular directions. This was evident during the staff meetings as the administrators discussed the topics for the action research projects in each classroom. Even though this was not apparent in this study, it was represented in the previous research and could be a related topic when studying the role of the administrator in future research.

Lack of time. A topic that was represented in this study was the sense of a lack of time by the participants for professional development. A lack of time can be a significant barrier for educators wanting to engage in training outside the classroom or away from the school facility (O'Mara & Gutierrez, 2010). Technology was offered as a possible solution to this issue, but it relies on educators having access to technology and being trained in utilizing it appropriately. The findings in this study offered one solution that changed the participants' perceptions about having a lack of time. The job-embedded training allowed participants to acquire new knowledge while on the job and encouraged collaboration to further achieve higher levels of understanding. Since the lack of time to engage in professional development was a significant barrier it would justify further research in job-embedded training as a possible solution in other settings.

This study has provided a basis for future research in addition to offering a new model for professional development. The previous areas of research added to this study and I hope the findings in this study will be beneficial for other education settings in

determining the best utilization of professional development time and funds. The topics identified could be better understood through further research, which could transform professional development practices in the future.

Conclusion

This study focused on gaining a greater understanding of the perceptions held by early childhood educators as they implemented action research as a professional development method. The findings in this study further advance the previous research conducted in the areas of professional development, action research and collaboration. Previous research had not been connected in relation to implementing action research as a professional development method in an early childhood setting. The research conducted in this study adds new research in that area and establishes a base for research beyond the early childhood setting. The study further contributes to the literature by generating a new model, grounded in data collected in the early childhood environment, to explain the process of implementing action research as a professional development method and the changes in professional practices that occur during the process.

The model generated from the findings in this study, the action to influence professional development model (Figure 2), can be utilized in settings beyond the early childhood environment based on the nondiscriminatory methods employed during the implementation. This model provides a basis for making significant changes to the traditional model of professional development. It also serves the purpose in not only saving money for educational facilities, but advancing educators to higher levels of professional practices by encouraging metacognition, through empowerment among

educators, better utilizing resources and engaging in active collaboration. Administrators can employ this model to improve upon the existing professional development practices in their environments through a thoughtful consideration of the methods presented in this systematic grounded theory study.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: ACTION RESEARCH TRAINING OUTLINE

What is Action Research?

Action research is a continuous and reflective process where educators make instructional decisions in their classrooms based on student needs reflected by classroom data. The action research process involves four phases:

- identifying a classroom problem/begin research on topic
- developing and implementing an action research plan
- collecting and analyzing data
- using and sharing results

Individual teacher research focuses on studying a problem or issue within a single classroom. The teacher who engages in individual teacher research may or may not have support from colleagues and administration to share, brainstorm, and discuss the topic of action research. Although just one teacher may become directly involved in action research, support from knowledgeable educators at the school is still important for successful teacher research to occur. Also, universities, educational agencies, and districts may encourage teacher action research by providing ongoing professional development related to the needs of the individual teacher researcher. These resources may also provide different venues for sharing the successes of the action research.

Collaborative action research focuses on studying a problem or issue within one or more classrooms. Teachers may collaborate and work together to study a particular problem in many different ways.

- co-teachers in one classroom studying a specific group of students
- a team of teachers focusing on a developmental issue
- a teacher, educational agency, or university personnel learning and studying a particular instructional practice
- a group of teachers in the same school studying the same instructional concern.

This collaborative action research approach fosters a joint effort because more than one teacher is involved in a specific area of study. Opportunities for sharing and dialogue are more likely to occur.

School-wide action research is a school reform initiative. Every teacher of the school is involved in studying a specific issue identified from school data. This approach requires a great deal of support from the administrators and lead teachers, but the results can lead to school-wide change. Successful school-wide action research is directly related to initiatives contained within the school improvement plan or licensure guidelines.

Journal Reflections

The journals are an important part of the research. Please record your thoughts, questions, concerns, and discoveries as you are implementing action research in your classroom. Three entries per week are requested, but feel free to record more as you have a new idea or thought.

Here are some guiding questions to assist you in getting started with your journal entries:

- What are some of your hesitations about implementing action research?
- Describe areas that you still do not fully understand when it comes to implementing action research in your classroom.
- Describe some of your challenges with implementing action research.
- Describe any breakthroughs or successes you are experiencing during the process of implementing action research.
- Record any changes you see in your classroom or professional practices during the process of implementing action research.
- Discuss what makes the implementation of action research easier as you progress.

There is no right or wrong answer. The information collected from these journals will be utilized to make improvements in professional development processes. Your complete honesty is valued and appreciated ☺ Thank you in advance for your time and effort.

APPENDIX B: JOURNAL OF RESEACHER BIAS

11/15/13 Initial Entry (Prior to beginning of research)

Having engaged in action research, I bring knowledge of the benefits and obstacles to engaging in action research in the classroom. In relation to action research, my initial bias toward that topic leans toward believing it can be a viable choice for professional development in any education setting if it is implemented fully by educators and supported by administrators.

In relation to early childhood environments, I have had exposure to a variety of early childhood settings and believe that action research could be a catalyst for more meaningful professional development.

However, after recent research, I have realized that the success of any professional development method relies on the perceptions and motivations of the educators. This new understanding has diminished my earlier position that action research would be successful in any setting, but I still feel like it could be an inexpensive yet very impactful source of professional development if introduced in the right way and given initial support.

I believe that by conducting the study in two similar early childhood settings that the capabilities of the teachers are comparable, which should lead to similar findings in both settings.

(*Excerpts from the Researcher Journal)

3/11/14 Research Begins

Hallelujah! This has been such a long process to get to this point. I feel it is necessary for me to revisit some of the biases I have going into this study. As previously mentioned in

this journal, I do feel action research can be very beneficial to educators. The question remains if they will accept this form of professional development or will they cling to the traditional models due to comfort.

3/12/14 Initial Interviews

Today was the first day of research and the first attempt at the interview process. The administration at site 2 has been great at being flexible with scheduling. However, the interviews were harder than I had anticipated. It was difficult at first to get into a good pattern between interviews. Some would linger after they finished and distracted others from getting started. I spoke to the administration about setting up a different location for the remainder of the interviews. Even though we were in a separate room, there were still distractions with people coming in and out to use the copier. I will make sure to double check at the other site prior to the interviews to make sure it is private.

3/13/14 Initial Interviews Day #2

I called the director at site one ahead of time to make sure we would have a quiet place to conduct the interviews. At site one there are not as many private areas available since it is a smaller preschool. However, the interviews went better at this site since I was more aware of the issues I had at the other site with distractions. At the end of day two I am a little stressed at all the information I have already, but I am still relieved it is moving in the right direction.

After the initial interviews, I have noticed a need to add some other training topics. The two topics I am adding are about making time for action research and integrating it into the classroom with ease.

3/14/14 Training Day

Today was the day. I administered all of the training at both sites. At first it was a little awkward because the teachers did not seem overly thrilled with beginning this process. However, after the training everybody had warmed up to the idea and seemed more at ease. Some seemed to struggle with an idea of where to begin. I am going to spend the first observations just focusing on their topic to make sure they are feeling comfortable with their choice.

3/17/14 & 3/18/14 Let it Snow!

Research was interrupted with snow. I am a little concerned with getting behind, but there is no reason to force anything over the next few days because the preschools are CRAZY right now with snow falling!

3/19/14 Areas to Think About

Ideas that I Would Like to Explore Further:

Attitude of Teachers About New Things- I am seeing some resistance from some of the teachers that were worried the process would take too much time. I am having a harder time getting some of those teachers to get started with the process.

Support of Administrators- These administrators are great! I am wondering how it would be to work with an administrator that wasn't so supportive.

3/24/14 Spontaneous Collaboration

A neat thing to watch is how some of the teachers have formed collaborative teams related to their topics. Site 2 has a done a better job of supporting collaboration over Site 1. My opinion is that Site 2 has a larger facility that provides more areas to collaborate. Maybe some insight to this will emerge during the next interview.

4/2/14 One Site at a Time

Now that everybody is doing so well with implementation, I feel comfortable focusing on just one site at a time. (The teachers have less to talk about and less questions at this point, so I am going to revert back to more of an observer)

4/9/14 All is Well

I have built very good rapport with the teachers. They seem to be so much more relaxed. It has been almost a month since the research has started and I have noticed progress in all situations. Some are more positive than others. Organizing the data is the only area that is not going well at this point. I feel like the teachers felt at the beginning of this process- where do I begin?

4/22/14 I'm Losing One

XXXXXX is really not seeming to enjoy the process. When I give her advice she seems to reject it. She is alone in her classroom and just does not seem to have anyone to

collaborate with on a regular basis. I'm not sure if her personality is preventing her from collaborating or if it is a valid issue. I will continue to observe that situation closely.

5/2/14 They Are Ready

Wow! I am amazed at everybody's progress. I have noticed some repeating themes that have emerged during the data analysis and I am excited that some areas of surprise have emerged (use of resources ☺). That lets me know that I am keeping my biases in check and allowing the data to inform this emerging theory. So excited right now!

APPENDIX C: SEMI-STRUCTURED, INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your background.
 - Family (You do not need to be specific)
 - Education
 - Work Experiences
2. Tell me what led you to work with young children?
3. What is your first thought when you hear the words “professional development?”
4. What types of professional development have you participated in? *Examples- workshops, conferences, online training, etc.*
5. Describe some of those experiences.
6. Are there types of professional development in which you are drawn to participate? Why do you feel that way?
7. Describe a professional development experience in which you felt it was a waste of time and did not learn a significant amount through the experience.
8. Describe a professional development experience in which you felt you learned a significant amount through the experience.
9. Describe what would make professional development more appealing to you.
10. What do you know about action research? Describe.
11. What are your first thoughts when you hear the words “action research”?
12. What thoughts or concerns would you have about implementing action research in your classroom?
13. When it comes to professional development, realistically what amount of time are you willing to devote to training and development outside your normal work hours?

APPENDIX D: ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS AND ASSESSMENT OF
PROGRESS

Action Research Process

Use this as a guide as you implement action research in your classroom. You can also use this as a guide in your journal writing.

1. **Statement of the problem** What is your question, goal, or issue in your classroom? This should be an issue for which you want to find an answer and that would make a difference in the learning environment.
2. **Rationale:** Why did you select this problem (question, goal, issue)? What is the origin or basis of the problem (where did it come from or what gave you the idea)? Why is this important problem?
3. **Context of the issue:** How is this issue relevant to your environment? Describe how it relates to the following: children in the class (age, abilities, and challenges), classroom environment, resources, materials, limitations, subject area (if appropriate), students' previous experiences, and any other relevant contextual information.
4. **What exactly will you do?** Describe plans, procedures, and timetable for your action research.
5. **Data:** How will you gather relevant information about your project? What are your sources of data and how will you keep records. What information will you need to determine if you have met your goals, solved the problem, answered the question, or addressed the issue in question 1 above? Will you observe, interview, use traditional or other testing, videotape or audiotape, examine student work, develop portfolios, use journals, note activity patterns, or use other ways to understand the situation and the changes that follow from your project?
6. **Analysis:** How will you use the information you gather? What will you do with it after you collect it? How will you pull it together to address the statement of problem above?
7. **Resources and References:** Keep a list of the research you use during your exploration of the issue and your implementation of the research-based strategies.
*You should use current research not more than five years old for best practices.

Action Research Assessment

Use this format to see where you are in the process and as a final assessment of implementing action research in your classroom.

_____ **1. Clear Statement of the Problem (question, goal, issue) Include**

Rationale: Why did you select this problem or question? Why is it important? Use pictures if you can to better illustrate the problem.

_____ **2. Context of the Project:** Describe the students (age, abilities, challenges), classroom, resources, materials, limitations, subject area (if appropriate), students' previous experiences, and any other relevant contextual information.

_____ **3. Supporting Research and Scholarship:** Summarize relevant research and scholarship that pertains to your problem or question. What does the literature suggest about possible solutions or actions? Make a case for your action plan.

_____ **4. Action/Intervention:** What exactly did you do? Describe procedures, interventions, timetable, including how you gathered relevant information (your sources of data).

_____ **5. Results:** What happened? What are the actual outcomes or effects of your action?

_____ **6. Reflections:** What are your observations, analyses, new understandings? How would you revise your plan to improve it or to learn more? How do your findings relate to what you anticipated at the beginning of the action research?

_____ **7. References:** Make sure to give credit to the research-based contributors. Provide a list of the research.

APPENDIX E: EXCERPTS FROM POWER POINTS OF ACTION RESEARCH

EXAMPLES

Provided with Permission

Problem & Rationale

Goal- To integrate more science and science-based opportunities into the classroom.

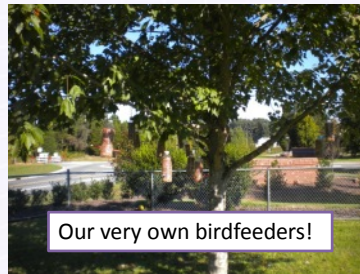
The growing recognition and importance of S.T.E.M. (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) has paved the way for school-age children and the related opportunities available to them in the school setting. Unfortunately, educators have struggled with incorporating these types of experiences into early childhood classrooms, either because they don't see the importance of starting science-based learning so early, or simply because they don't know how. While the DCCC-CCDC is a top-notch, 5 star center full of educated teachers, there have been some concerns about the lack of science that is incorporated in the classrooms. We all know that children are active learners and construct their knowledge through hands-on, real-life experiences and opportunities (Pica, 2009). As a result of the growing need to incorporate more science in early childhood classrooms, I have chosen to base my Action Research Project around this issue.

Context

- Pre-K Classroom
- Children ages 3-5 (older 3s, younger 5s)
- Lack of science-related materials
- Lead teacher admits to not knowing how to effectively incorporate science



Learning about recycling from Ms. Holly



Our very own birdfeeders!



Our pet Slug...
Yuck!



Statement of the Problem...

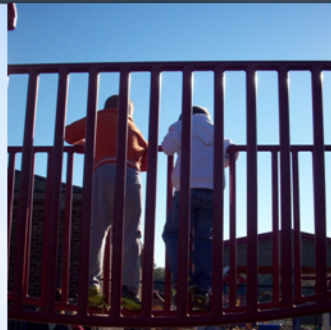


- The children's behavior on the playground has included arguing, fighting, crying, and disregarding equipment procedures such as waiting to use the slide one at a time.
- When attempting to resolve the behavior issues the physical environment was considered and several questions were considered. Why are the children not engaging in purposeful play? Why are the children all attempting to use the slides at the same time? How can I manipulate the outdoor environment so that the children become more involved in play and less involved in confrontations and inappropriate behaviors?

Photographic evidence of the issue...



The children are crowded at the slide and are pushing one another down the slide.



The children are climbing equipment even though they know it is a safety rule to NOT climb the railing.

Photographic evidence continued...



The children are wandering aimlessly in crowds with no purposeful play. This is when inappropriate social behavior takes place. The children push, shove, and frustrate one another.



The children are not following slide rules of going down on their bottoms.

Photographic evidence cont...



The children crowd the slide for the entire 60 minute outdoor period.

This outdoor time should be utilized in a way that helps children to grow in all developmental domains, and at this time there are too many instances of arguments and inappropriate behaviors that must be redirected.

Action/Intervention...



- An outdoor classroom with various 'centers' based on interest will be developed in order to engage children and thus reduce negative behaviors..
- Each new activity will be brought out and directly supervised by one of the two teachers. As the children become familiar with each activity it will be supervised less directly and a new activity will be introduced. Student interest will be considered when deciding which materials to provide and amounts which should be provided.
- Resources from the center are limited, but some equipment was located. An easel, a garden bed, paints/markers, and additional balls have been added from the centers resources.
- Other activities must be developed and purchased from teacher funds. Since these materials are purchased/owned by the teacher the materials will not be left outdoors for whole-center use. The materials purchased by the teacher include: sidewalk paint (corn starch, water, and food coloring), bubble wands and a bubble solution (water and dawn dish detergent mixed in a gallon container), dishes/spoons/containers for kitchen play/sandbox play, tree blocks, cars/tracks, and other materials for group activities.

APPENDIX F: ACTION RESEARCH ARTICLES

These articles are practitioner friendly and show action research being implemented in the classroom. These articles were printed and provided for teachers during the training.

Adams, P. K., & Warner, L. (2001). Action research: How to find answers to everyday questions. *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, 29(3), 26-30.

Diana, T. J. (2011). Becoming a teacher leader through action research. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, Summer, 170-173.

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- ✓ **Identify Specific Topic of Interest**
 - What do you really want to explore?
 - What is your main topic of interest?
 - ✓ **Review the Literature**
 - What are other scholars saying about the people and topic you are studying? This research will give you a basis for beginning the questioning.
 - ✓ **Develop Questions**
 - What are some questions that have gone unanswered about the subjects and the topic of interest?
 - How do these questions differ from what previous research says? This helps make sure they are grounded in literature.
 - Are the questions open-ended? Make them expansive to allow the participant to take the question in several different directions. Begin some of the questions with “tell me about” to promote discussion and to leave room for ideas, impressions, and concepts which may have not been anticipated to emerge from the data.
 - Have you built in basic background data questions to build rapport?
 - Have you created prompts for more broad questions? This helps you stay on track to collect pre-planned specifics not mentioned by the interviewee. (Example: “Tell me about your background.” Then list bulleted prompts to make sure everything is covered (Family, School, Work Experience, etc.)
 - ✓ **Organize Questions**
 - Arrange least difficult to more complex.
 - Decide if questions fall under the semi-structured, follow-up, or focus categories.
 - Develop a script for the beginning and ending of the interview. This will help the participants understand their rights and ensures you conduct research in an ethical manner.
 - ✓ **Pilot Your Questions**
 - Ask a friend the questions to see if they flow and make sense.
 - Then, find someone close to the population you wish to study and ask them the questions.
- Other Helpful Tips for the Interview:**
- Maintain good eye contact
 - Arrange the interview in a quiet, semi-private place to encourage conversation
 - Make sure you are uninterrupted. Turn off phones and block off plenty of time to complete the interview. Make the interviewee aware of the same.
 - Keep it focused. If the interview begins to wander, then use prompts to get back on track.
 - Listen intently. Limit talking to briefly sharing for rapport building.

APPENDIX H: OPEN-ENDED, FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe the process of implementing action research in your classroom.
2. What are some of the challenges you are facing during this process?
3. What are your thoughts about your ability to conduct research in your classroom?
4. Describe how you see yourself as a researcher. Has that changed through this process?
5. Describe any interactions you have had with your colleagues in relation to action research.
6. What opportunities have you had to collaborate with colleagues prior to implementing action research?
7. What setting or situation has been more conducive for collaboration with your colleagues? Describe what made it more conducive.
8. In relation to collaboration, describe the positive aspects of collaborating with your colleagues.
9. In relation to collaboration, describe some “not so positive” aspects of collaborating with your colleagues.
10. In your opinion, has collaboration been helpful in implementing action research in your classroom? Why or why not?

APPENDIX I: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In relation to action research, how do you perceive this method and its use in your classroom?
2. What reservations did you have going into the process of implementing action research that now are no longer a reservation?
3. What reservations did you have going into the process of implementing action research that are still present? Why do think they are still concerns?
4. If reservations are still present... what do you feel would minimize those reservations?
5. What changes did you make to your environment that was directly related to action research or the collaborative process?
6. Describe the areas where you see significant change in your in your professional practices.
7. In relation to professional development, do you have a preference in types of professional development? If so, what types?
8. Describe what you think about when you hear the words “professional development” now.
9. Now that you have implemented action research in your classroom, how do you see yourself utilizing this type of professional development in the future?

APPENDIX J: OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Data was gathered through interviews, observations, and journals. Data collection took place over a period of approximately two months while being submerged in the environments due to the rapidly changing perceptions of the participants. The following is a general description of the procedures that were provided to the site for prior approval:

Interviews

The interviews will be in three different formats: (1) semi-structured; initial face-to-face interviews, (2) follow-up face-to-face interviews (open-ended), and (3) a focus group interview. Questions have been validated through research and have been piloted with a previous group of individuals. Interviews will occur at three different points in the research period. The first interviews will be prior to introducing the concept of action research in the environment to identify any preconceived ideas about the approach. The second interview will take place during the process of implementing action research. This interview will be in an open-ended format to allow the participants to expand on their experiences and reflect on journal entries throughout the process. The third and final interview will be in a focus group format. Focus group data will be used to describe the process of implementing action research as a professional development method.

Observations

The researcher will be spending a significant amount of time in the classroom during the morning learning routines at each site to observe the action research process and documentation. Afternoon times are an additional option if needed. In early childhood environments, the morning instruction is the prime learning time before children eat

lunch and move into rest period. After naptime, afternoon times are utilized for review of learning topics and further investigation of new topics in learning centers. Specified timeframes for classroom observation will be between 7:00am-12:00pm and 3:00pm-6:00pm. Classroom visits will be unscheduled to allow for flexibility. Information will be gathered in field notes and categories will be identified as they emerge. Observations will take place on a daily basis for a period of approximately two months to observe natural operations and to build rapport with the participants. Field notes will be taken at each observation session. The following observation protocol will be used as a template for each observation:

| | | |
|--|--|-------------------------------|
| Observer: Donna James | Participant Observed: | Action Research Topic: |
| Date of Observation: | Time of Observation: Start _____ End _____ | |
| Assistance Requested: Yes _____ No _____ Describe nature of assistance requested: | | |
| Describe any visible implementation of action research in the classroom: | | |
| Describe any collaboration taking place as related to the process of implementing action research: | | |

| |
|--|
| Verify at what point the participants are in the action research process (utilize Handout 2 to identify the parts of the process): |
| Describe any questions or concerns the participant has about action research at this time: |
| Additional Notes: |

Journals

The participants and the researcher will be keeping a journal during the study to identify themes that might emerge beyond the interviews and observations. These journals will be utilized in the final interview to have the participants reflect on the process and their own thoughts and perceptions of action research and collaboration. Participants will be asked to record thoughts about the process in their journal at least three times a week. A guide for journal writing is provided as part of Handout 1 during the training. The journals will provide a record of the participants' thoughts about the process and perceived changes in the environment.

APPENDIX K: OPEN CODES

Open Codes

| | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Time-Consuming | Helpful | Positive Anticipation |
| Increased Workload | Reflective | Enjoys Learning New Things |
| “Back in School” | Acquired Knowledge | Collaboration |
| Difficult | Able to Apply Knowledge | Empowerment |
| Process | Having Support | Teacher as Researcher |
| Sharing Information | Distribution of Work | Community |
| Gaining Assistance | Sharing Resources | Irritating People |
| Time Limitations | Confidence | Feeling in Control |
| Self-Centered Behaviors | “Impressed With Myself” | Not as Isolated |
| Distractions | Not as Difficult | Confident in the Process |
| Support With Questions | Resourceful | Not as Time-Consuming |
| Support Through Similar Situations | “I Feel Strong” | Relationships |
| Support Through Ideas | Help Myself | Thinking |
| Support Through Information | Finding Answers | |
| Ideas Based on Research | Change of Attitude | |

APPENDIX L: EXAMPLE OF OPEN CODING FOR RESEARCH SUB- QUESTION ONE

Open Codes for RQ1

Research Sub-Question One: How do educators perceive action research prior to implementing in an early childhood environment?

| Open Code | Properties | Participants' Words |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Time-Consuming | Worried about how much time it will take to administer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take up a lot of time (1, p. 5) • Take too much time (3, p. 5) • Take some time (9, p. 5) • Will I be able to fit it in (4, p. 5) |
| Increased Workload | Thinking it will be more work for them on top of their current job responsibilities and having to juggle several responsibilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Something else I am going to need to learn (8, p. 5) • Wouldn't be looking forward to more work (10, p. 5) • How it will work in my class with my other planning (1, p. 5) • How much writing it will be (8, p. 5) • Will I be able to handle it (3, p. 5) |
| "Back in School" | Equating the process with previous school work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scholarly (5, p. 5) • I was back in school (2, p. 5) |
| Difficult | Concerned the process will be too hard | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard and long (4, p. 5) • Hard and scary (12, p. 5) |
| Process as Helpful | Recognizing the process as | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helpful with my |

| | | |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| | helpful | <p>teaching (7, p. 5)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making a plan and changing something (6, p. 5) • It would be helpful (11, p. 5) |
| Reflective | <p>Understands that part of the process is analyzing progress (indicates some prior knowledge of action research)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stepping back and analyzing something (11, p. 5) |
| Acquired Knowledge | <p>Concerned about having the information needed to implement in classroom</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will I have information I need (2, p.5) |
| Being Able to Apply Knowledge | <p>Concerned about not understanding the process and being able to execute once training has been completed</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I will be lost or not (2, p. 5) • If I will know how to do it (5, p. 5) • How to begin (10, p. 5) |
| Having Support | <p>Concerned about having someone to support them or to physically help with the process</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will I have some help (8, p. 5) • Not having any assistance (12, p. 5) |
| Positive Anticipation | <p>Seems to be positive about implementing action</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking forward to it (6, p. 5) |

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| | research | |
| Enjoys Learning New Things | Expresses they want to learn more about the process | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Want to learn more (6, p. 5) |

Data related to research sub-question one is based on the initial, semi-structured interview only.

Observations and journals did not begin until after training was implemented.

APPENDIX M: AXIAL CODING DIAGRAM

Axial Coding Diagram Showing Relationships Among the Concepts

| Reflecting on Practices | Confidence and Initiative | Seeking Out Resources | Sharing Information With Others |
|---|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Back in School" • Reflective • Acquired Knowledge • Able to Apply Knowledge • Positive Anticipation • Thinking • Enjoys Learning New Things • Ideas Based on Research • Change in Attitude | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowerment • Confidence • Help Myself • Teacher as Researcher • "I Feel Strong" • Confidence in Process • Feel in Control • "Impressed With Myself" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time-Consuming to Not Time-Consuming • Increased Workload to Distribution of Work • Difficult to Not as Difficult • Resourceful • Process • Gaining Assistance • Sharing Resources • Support Through Similar Situations • Support Through Information and Ideas | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships • Not as Isolated • Sharing Information • Irritating People • Self-Centered Behaviors • Distractions • Support With Questions • Community • Collaboration |

Codes were organized into more narrow categories according to relationships between the concepts that emerged during the data collection.

APPENDIX N: AXIAL CODES RELATIONSHIPS

Axial Coding Process of Narrowing Categories

- Original Open Codes (Highlighted According to Relationships)

| | | |
|---|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Time-Consuming <i>* Replaced by Not as Time-Consuming</i> | Helpful | Positive Anticipation |
| Increased Workload <i>* Replaced by Distribution of Work</i> | Reflective | Enjoys Learning New Things |
| “Back in School” | Acquired Knowledge | Collaboration |
| Difficult <i>* Replaced by Not as Difficult</i> | Able to Apply Knowledge | Empowerment |
| Process | Having Support | Teacher as Researcher |
| Sharing Information | <i>*Distribution of Work</i> | Community |
| Gaining Assistance | Sharing Resources | Irritating People |
| Time Limitations | Confidence | Feeling in Control |
| Self-Centered Behaviors | “Impressed With Myself” | Not as Isolated |
| Distractions | <i>*Not as Difficult</i> | Confident in the Process |
| Support With Questions | Resourceful | <i>*Not as Time-Consuming</i> |
| Support Through Similar Situations | “I Feel Strong” | Relationships |
| Support Through Ideas | Help Myself | Thinking |
| Support Through Information | Finding Answers | |
| Ideas Based on Research | Change of Attitude | |

- Emerging Relationships Identified to Create Sub-Categories:

| | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Reflecting on Practices | Seeking Out Resources |
| Confidence and Initiative | Sharing Information With Others |

APPENDIX O: IRB APPROVAL

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 11, 2014

Donna James

IRB Approval 1816.031114: A Grounded Theory Study of the Experiences of Early Childhood Educators Implementing Action Research as a Professional Development Method

Dear Donna,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

(434) 592-4054

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UNIVERSITY.

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APPENDIX P: EXAMPLE OF AXIAL CODING FOR INDIVIDUAL CATEGORIES

Axial Codes from Interviews (Category Tab: Confidence/ Initiative)

| Category: Confidence/ Initiative | Properties and In Vivo Codes |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Confidence/Empowerment | "Once I finally got it I started feeling better." |
| | (10 p. 3) OE |
| | "...solve our own problems by researching." |
| | (10 p. 3) OE |
| | "Helps us to be better at what we do." |
| | (5 p. 1) FG |
| | "Makes me feel like a super teacher." |
| | (5 p. 1) FG |
| | "Will make us better teachers." |
| | (6 p. 1) FG |
| | "I have more confidence now." |
| | (6 p. 1) FG |
| | "I feel more confident." |
| | (1 p. 9) FG |
| | "I am a better teacher" |
| | (11 p. 9) FG |
| | "Before I just thought we couldn't do anything" |
| | (10 p. 10) FG |
| Help Myself | "...able to help myself rather than relying on somebody else" |
| | (7 p. 9) FG |

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| | |
| Teacher as Researcher | "I see myself being a researcher" |
| | (2 p. 9) FG |
| | |
| "I Feel Strong" | "I feel strong." |
| | (2 p. 9) FG |
| | |
| Confidence in Process | "...gave me a structure to use to add a |
| | more research emphasis to my classroom." |
| | (1 p. 1) FG |
| | |
| | "It works." |
| | (9 p. 1) FG |
| | |
| Feel in Control | "I feel more control..." |
| | (5 p. 10) FG |
| | |
| "Impressed With Myself" | "I was pretty impressed with myself." |
| | (3 p. 1) FG |
| | |

(Participant #, Page # in Transcript)

OE: Open-Ended, Follow-up Interview

FG: Focus Group Interview

APPENDIX Q: INITIAL, SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW ANSWERS

(QUESTIONS 10, 11 and 12)

Question 10: What do you know about action research?

| Participant | Question 10 Answer | Memo |
|-------------|--|---------------------|
| Shannon | I've never heard of this type of research. | None |
| Wanda | Not sure what you mean. (Have you ever heard of action research?) No. | None |
| Jackie | Not much. | Some |
| Avery | Nothing really. | None |
| Veronica | I don't know. | None |
| Cora | It's coming up with a plan for your classroom, I think. | Plan for Class |
| Molly | I need to learn more about it. | Interested but none |
| Lana | I don't know much about that topic. | Some |
| Elise | It's some type of research used in education, I think. | Education Research |
| Kristy | I do not know much about action research. | None |
| Sonja | From what I have read before, I think it is about looking at yourself as a teacher and making some changes based on what you have done before. | Reflective |
| Sherry | I haven't heard much about it. | None |

Question 11: What are your first thoughts when you hear the words “action research”?

| Participant | Question 11 Answer | Memo |
|-------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Shannon | Sounds like it can take up a lot of time. | Time-Consuming |
| Wanda | That’s hard since I really don’t know much about it. I guess I would say my first thought was that I was back in school. | Previous Degree Work |
| Jackie | It sounds like it would take too much time. | Time-Consuming |
| Avery | I’m blank. (Just describe your first thoughts when you hear the words.) Hard and long. | Difficult; Time-Consuming |
| Veronica | Scholarly. I’m not sure. | Academic |
| Cora | I think of making a plan and changing something. | Improvement |
| Molly | Helpful with my teaching. | Helpful |
| Lana | My first thought is that it is something else I am going to need to learn and be responsible for. | Burden |
| Elise | It’s going to take some time to do it. | Time-Consuming |
| Kristy | Well I think it makes me feel like it’s going to take too much time and I wouldn’t be looking forward to more work. | Time-Consuming; Added Workload |
| Sonja | Action research makes me think of stepping back and analyzing something. | Reflective |
| Sherry | Hard and scary. | Difficult; Causes Apprehension |

Question 12: What thoughts or concerns would you have about implementing action research in your classroom?

| Participant | Question 12 Answer | Memo |
|-------------|--|--|
| Shannon | My concern would be how it will work in my class with my other planning and lessons. | Extra Workload |
| Wanda | Will I have all of the information I need? I really don't know that much about it, so my concern is whether I will be lost or not. | Having Support/ Knowledge |
| Jackie | If I'll be able to handle it without my assistant's help. She's good, but she isn't going to do anything extra. | Extra Workload |
| Avery | Just if I will be able to fit it in. My classroom is very busy. | Time Constraints |
| Veronica | Not sure. (What still brings a question to your mind about starting action research?) Oh. If I will know how to do it. | Having Support/ Knowledge |
| Cora | I'm looking forward to it. I've heard about it, but want to learn more. | No Concern |
| Molly | I don't have any concerns. | No Concern |
| Lana | I have a few concerns. One will I have some help if I don't know what I am doing and two how much writing will it be? | Having Support/ Knowledge Extra Workload |

| | | |
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| Elise | I'm okay. I was just thinking about if it would take too much time. | Time Constraints |
| Kristy | Knowing where to start. I really don't know how I would begin. | Having Support/ Knowledge |
| Sonja | I think it would be helpful because there may be areas that I don't realize are a weakness. | No Concern |
| Sherry | I am concerned about being in the classroom alone and not having any assistance with this. | Having Support/ Knowledge Workload |

APPENDIX R: ADDITION TO ACTION RESEARCH TRAINING

The two additional training areas: (a) Making Time for Action Research and (b) Integrating Action Research with Ease, were added to the training module after the initial, semi-structured interview. These topics were added to address the concerns of the participants about the process being time-consuming and having the knowledge needed for a seamless process.

Making Time for Action Research and Integrating with Ease

If your concern is about whether or not the process will take too much time, NEVER FEAR... Action Research can be done at any time you are in front of your computer or on your iPad. If time isn't the issue and you are concerned with knowing what to do then DON'T WORRY- that's what technical assistance is all about. Here are some time saving strategies:

- Share your topic with others in case they have some information they can share with you that would be helpful
- Use a keyword when searching for information on the web. The best sites to use if you are not affiliated with a college are www.naeyc.org and www.zerotothree.org. These are professional organizations that can lead you to quality resources if you do not have access to a college library online.
- Use the first ten minutes of your staff meeting time to discuss issues and to allow access to technology for searches. Administrators may be able to help with the topic search if you have limited access to technology.
- Create a folder on your desktop, laptop or iPad where you can store interesting articles or information to review later. Only print out the items that are most helpful in creating your action plan.
- Once you find all of your information, building your action plan is a breeze.
- Be sure to ask questions if you can't find the information you need online. Most of the time a little change in your search words makes a huge difference.
- Technical Assistance is Available. During the study, I will be available each day to assist with any questions or concerns that arise. In case I miss you or you are busy when I drop in... feel free to text your questions to 980-621-1257. Be sure to leave your name and the best time to reach you.

APPENDIX S: OPEN-ENDED, FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW ANSWERS

(QUESTIONS 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10)

Question 5: Describe any interactions you have had with your colleagues in relation to action research.

| Participant | Question 5 Answer | Memo |
|-------------|---|--|
| Shannon | We've collaborated some. I helped Veronica with some her research on technology. I had gone to a workshop earlier and had some good information she could use. That's about it. | Shared Information |
| Wanda | Interactions... well I have talked to everybody to see what they were doing and we have talked some during our staff meetings. Um...I asked everybody's opinion about what they wanted to see changed on the playground since I was focusing on the outdoors. | Elicited Input from Others |
| Jackie | I have had some interactions when I visited everyone's classroom to find out what types of technology we were all using. It's hard to interact though being in different classes. <u>But, we had some coverage for our classes if we needed any help with this (action research).</u> | Elicited Input from Others <u>Administrator</u> <u>Support</u> |
| Avery | Not very much, but I don't get out of my classroom very often. (Teaches 2 year olds) (Have you had any | Shared Information |

| | | |
|----------|---|---|
| | <p>interactions like during staff meeting?) Oh, yes. (Tell me about it.) We've talked about it several times during then. I just forgot about that. (So, were you sharing information during staff or discussing issues?) Yes. We did both. Everybody was sharing their topic and then some people had some information that could help them with their research. (Did anyone share information with you or did you share information with someone else to help them?) I helped Wanda with some of her ideas for my kids.</p> | |
| Veronica | <p>Talking and sharing ideas. I shared an article I found about recycling that everybody could use to let the parents know about the upcoming recycling project. I think that was helpful.</p> | <p>Shared Information and Resources</p> |
| Cora | <p>I surveyed everybody's class to find out what types of resources they already had. I needed to get a good list before I started looking for other materials. We talked about as a group what types of things we needed in our classes.</p> | <p>Elicited Input from Others</p> |
| Molly | <p>We've had some time we could work together on our issues. Lana and I are having similar issues with reaching our families and getting them involved.</p> | <p>Shared Information and</p> |

| | | |
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| | <p>We've interacted a lot recently to share some things. I found a really neat article and made her a copy and she's given me some ideas she found.</p> | Resources |
| Lana | <p>Do you mean in the classroom? (Anywhere. Molly said you were able to interact with each other.) Yes. We both teach NC-Pre-K (North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten) and our parents just do not seem to care about getting involved. On top of that, we have so many families that don't speak English. It makes it difficult to do anything. (So, what ways have you interacted with Molly or others?) We've given each other ideas to try and been able to look up some articles together on our breaks. Just sharing what we can find.</p> | <p>Shared Information and Resources</p> |
| Elise | <p>We've had a lot of time to work together on this. During our staff meetings we were able to talk about our ideas and make copies of what each other found. I <u>didn't realize until now that we all had the same issues.</u> (What do you mean?) Well, Sonja has had trouble with transitions and Kristy has had some trouble, too. We could've been helping each other this whole time- we've just never talked about it. I've</p> | <p>Shared Information and Resources</p> <p>Elicited Input from Others</p> <p><u>New thought</u></p> |

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| | asked for ideas from other teachers, too. It's good. | <u>pattern</u> <u>directly</u> <u>linked to this</u> <u>process-</u> <u>COLLABORATION</u> |
| Kristy | <p>I've had a lot of interaction with everybody. <u>Once I finally got it I started feeling better.</u></p> <p>I've worked mostly with Elise and Sonja, but everybody has given some advice when we talked about it during staff meeting. Our <u>director looked up</u> <u>some information</u> to help us get started and then it seemed to click, you know? (Tell me more about what you mean by it seemed to click.) Well- I just mean it finally clicked in what we were doing. You were right... we do this all the time but we didn't know it. (Do what all the time?) <u>Solve our own problems by researching. I just never thought of it as research.</u></p> | <p>Shared Information and Resources</p> <p><u>Earlier</u> <u>hesitation of</u> <u>not having</u> <u>enough</u> <u>support or</u> <u>knowledge</u> <u>has</u> <u>diminished.</u></p> <p><u>Administrator</u></p> <p><u>Support</u></p> <p><u>Shift in</u> <u>thought</u></p> |

| | | |
|--------|---|--|
| | | <p><u>pattern about</u></p> <p><u>research-</u></p> <p><u>EMPOWERMENT;</u></p> <p><u>TEACHER AS</u></p> <p><u>RESEARCHER</u></p> |
| Sonja | <p>We've been working together as a team on this. It's been really helpful to be able to have time to talk about our problems in the classroom and not feel like we are all alone. (Tell me more about the time you've had to talk about the issues.) Mostly during staff meetings, but we've made time to meet together on our breaks, too. <u>We talked to our director so we could</u></p> <p><u>make sure we were on break at the same time.</u></p> | <p>Shared</p> <p>Information</p> <p><u>Administrator</u></p> <p><u>Support</u></p> |
| Sherry | <p>Staff meetings. During break time. That's mostly where we have had time to interact with each other. (How have you been interacting during break times?) We sit in the conference room while we are eating our lunch and most of the time we have time to look up things or talk about what we have found. Nobody had the same topic that I did, but some of the teachers had a child that was Autistic before and gave me some ideas about what they had tried.</p> | <p>Shared</p> <p>Information</p> <p>and</p> <p>Resources</p> |

Question 6: What opportunities have you had to collaborate with colleagues prior to implementing action research?

| Participant | Question 6 Answer | Memo |
|-------------|--|--|
| Shannon | During staff meetings mostly. | Staff |
| Wanda | Trainings and staff meetings. | Staff and Training |
| Jackie | Sometimes in the break room, but not really. It's usually during staff meetings, but not really a lot during those times either. | Staff |
| Avery | Not much. (Tell me about any times you were able to talk to your colleagues about issues in your classroom?) We talked some before our meetings get started, but the meetings are mainly focused on housekeeping issues- not problems or training. | Some before meetings |
| Veronica | During staff development days we have time to work together. (Tell me more about your staff development days.) We only have them twice a year and it's time when we can work in our classroom or sometimes we have a training planned. (So... tell me how you collaborate on those days.) Mostly during training. We like to take those days and clean | Staff Development Days (Center Closed) |

| | | |
|--------|--|-------------------------|
| | our classrooms really good. | |
| Cora | I like to attend the workshops and conferences. We collaborate during the training and share ideas. | Training |
| Molly | During our lead teacher staff meeting. Well you know... we meet each week just the leads and go over things that are specific for us. | Staff |
| Lana | Staff meetings definitely. (Tell me how you collaborate.) Just talking out issues and sharing ideas. | Staff |
| Elise | Staff and on the playground. (Tell me more about the playground time.) Well- we come up with ideas we can do together with our classes like field day or watermelon parties. (So... like special events mostly?) Yes. (Did you talk about classroom issues?) No- not really. | Staff and Playground |
| Kristy | Wednesday staff meetings. We meet every week, which at first I didn't like. (Tell me why you didn't like it.) Everybody was late and it just seemed like a waste of time, but it has been helpful during this project (action | Staff |

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| | research). (Was it helpful before starting action research?) Yes, but I just don't like to waste time and sometimes I felt like it was a waste of time. | |
| Sonja | I talk a lot to Elise and we shared ideas even before. (Elise mentioned collaborating during the playground time. Is that what you are talking about?) Yes and sometimes after work. We knew each other before we started working here, so I can call her if I need anything. | Playground After Work |
| Sherry | Staff time and days we have training away from the center. (Tell me about days away from the center.) When we close and go somewhere else for training it seems like we have more time to talk about things rather than trying to cram it in during a meeting. | Staff and Staff Development Days (Center Closed) |

Question 7: What setting or situation has been more conducive for collaboration with your colleagues? Describe what made it more conducive.

| Participant | Question 7 Answer | Memo |
|-------------|--|-------------------|
| Shannon | Do you mean other than staff meetings? (Yes. | Quiet and Private |

| | | |
|----------|---|--|
| | Are there specific places here at the center that promote more collaboration or situations that encourage more collaboration?) The break room, I guess because it is away from everything. | |
| Wanda | Somewhere quiet and comfortable. | Quiet and Comfortable |
| Jackie | Staff meetings do. (What is it about staff meetings that promotes more collaboration?) The fact that we're all together. That rarely happens. | Group Setting |
| Avery | Anywhere away from the kids. I can't concentrate on anything when I am in the classroom. (So is there an area here at the center where you can get away to talk with your colleagues?) The loft area. It can still be loud, but we can talk about issues if we need to. | Away from Responsibility of Supervising Children |
| Veronica | During naptime. It's quiet and you can think and talk. (Tell me about who you talk to during naptime.) Mostly my assistant teacher, but I've had parent conferences during naptime, too. | Quiet |

| | | |
|-------|--|--|
| Cora | In my room during naptime. We (assistant teacher) sit at the tables and plan out everything for the next week. (What makes that conducive?) It's quiet and we can spread out on the table to work. | Quiet and Roomy |
| Molly | During staff meeting. There's no kids and I can think. I can only concentrate on one thing at a time. | Away from Responsibility of Supervising Children |
| Lana | Probably in the break room because it's quiet and comfy. (What makes it comfortable?) The couches. After you are on your feet all day that is relaxing. I get tired of sitting on those little chairs in the classroom. (So tell me about collaborating with your colleagues in the break room.) Oh, we just have time to talk. It's quiet and you can hear yourself think. | Quiet and Comfortable |
| Elise | The break room is large enough for us all to meet when we need to. We usually have our lead teacher meeting in the director's office, but the break room is more open and we have the computers in there. | Plenty of Room and Access to Technology |

| | | |
|--------|---|--|
| Kristy | Anywhere that is quiet and not in the classroom. The kids never let us talk and if they do you can't concentrate on what is being said because they know you are distracted and start doing something they shouldn't. | Quiet and Away from the Responsibility of Supervising Children |
| Sonja | I like naptime. It's the only time I can just put on the soft music and have time to think. (Do you collaborate during your naptime with your assistant teacher or other teachers?) Sometimes we do. We have had short meetings in my room when we were planning something. | Quiet |
| Sherry | At trainings it is most conducive because we have time to absorb what is being said and think about how we can actually use the information. | Training Situations because of Time |

Question 8: In relation to collaboration, describe the positive aspects of collaborating with your colleagues.

| Participant | Question 8 Answer | Memo |
|-------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Shannon | They have good ideas. | Sharing Information |

| | | |
|----------|--|-----------------------------------|
| Wanda | We can help each other. | Gaining Assistance |
| Jackie | Less work for everybody because we can share the workload. | Distribution of Work |
| Avery | I like socializing and having time to talk to everybody. It can get lonely in our classrooms away from everybody. | Social Aspect |
| Veronica | Helping each other out when we need it or we are stuck with an idea. (Tell me more about being stuck with an idea.) I mean when you've tried to solve a problem and you just can't figure out what to do. Sometimes one of the other teachers has already went through that same situation and they can give advice about how to handle it. | Sharing Information |
| Cora | Getting together and sharing lesson ideas and materials. We spend a lot of our own money in the classroom, so it is helpful when we can borrow something for one of our activities. | Sharing Information and Resources |
| Molly | Knowing that we are all in the same boat. Everybody has that one child or that one | Community and Social Aspect |

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| | parent that drives them crazy. It's like having moral support. | |
| Lana | Sharing information that can help in the classroom. (What types of information do you usually share?) Mostly lesson ideas, but sometimes we share an idea about behaviors and just listen to each other vent. We have to look out for each other. | Sharing Information and Community |
| Elise | Good ideas from my colleagues. (What type of ideas do you usually gain from your colleagues?) I get some ideas about fun activities or something that really worked in a transition. | Sharing Information |
| Kristy | Having time to talk to other adults. Most of my conversations are at the kid's level. (What types of things do you talk about with your colleagues when you are collaborating?) We talk about personal things sometimes, but when we are collaborating it is usually something that we have been told to do or figure out. (Tell me more.) Well- like this event (points to a | Adult Interactions and Planning Events |

| | | |
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| | flyer about a center-wide event). We all pitched in and came up with game ideas for the kids and families. | |
| Sonja | Hearing everybody's perspective on something. Your way is not always the way that works the best. | Sharing Information |
| Sherry | The positive side to collaborating is sharing the responsibility and hearing everybody's ideas about something. (Tell me more about sharing the responsibility for something.) I mean, we work together on some things like bigger events and conferences. We all come up with ideas and props. | Distribution of Work |

Question 9: In relation to collaboration, describe some “not so positive” aspects of collaborating with your colleagues.

| Participant | Question 9 Answer | Memo |
|-------------|--|--------------------------|
| Shannon | We just don't always have time to collaborate. | Time Limitations |
| Wanda | There are some people that you just don't want to hear them talk anymore. (Tell me about that without being specific to who you are talking about.) Some people just | Dominating Conversations |

| | | |
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| | dominate the whole conversation and they don't really have anything useful to offer. | |
| Jackie | I don't know. (Have you had any times when you were in a collaborative session and it didn't go well?) Not really. I can't think of anything negative. | All Positive |
| Avery | We run out of time once we get started. (Tell me more.) When we do get time to talk then it seems to fly by and it's time to get back to our classroom. | Time Limitations |
| Veronica | Know it alls. (Tell me what you mean by that.) You know those people that try to tell you that you are doing it all wrong and to listen to them. (Is it like dominating the conversation?) No. They just think their way is best and they don't listen to anybody else's ideas. | Self-Centered Behaviors |
| Cora | Lack of time to get together. | Time limitations. |
| Molly | I think trying to collaborate when there is too much going on. For example, when we meet in the conference room we can close the doors and put up a do not disturb sign, but | Distractions |

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| | when we meet in the director's office she is getting all kinds of calls and people stopping by all the time. It gets distracting. | |
| Lana | Sometimes the conversations get off subject and it takes awhile to get back to the issue being discussed. | Distractions |
| Elise | Having too much to talk about and not getting around to talking about everybody's concerns | Time limitations |
| Kristy | Talking about things that we have already tried sometimes seems like a waste of time. Somebody tries to offer help, but it ends up not being anything new to try. | Non-useful Information |
| Sonja | I haven't really had a bad experience with collaborating. | All Positive |
| Sherry | Some people don't have the same type of situations like I do in my classroom, so it doesn't help me as much as it does others. | Non-useful Information |

Question 10: In your opinion, has collaboration been helpful in implementing action research in your classroom? Why or why not?

| Participant | Question 10 Answer | Memo |
|-------------|---|---|
| Shannon | Yes. I think so. (How has it been helpful?) Getting started together was helpful because we could ask each other questions. | Yes- Support with Questions |
| Wanda | Yeah it's been helpful in being able to talk about it with each other. | Yes- Support with Questions |
| Jackie | Definitely helpful. I wouldn't have wanted to try to learn all of this on my own. (So, how did the collaborative element help you?) Just being able to find out what direction other people were taking with their topics and then sharing ideas. | Yes- Support with Questions and Ideas |
| Avery | The collaboration was helpful because we were all doing the same thing at the same time. | Yes- Support through Similar Situations |
| Veronica | Yes in my opinion it has been helpful. (In what ways?) With figuring out our topics and making sure we stayed on task. | Yes- Support through Ideas and Motivation |
| Cora | Oh yes. We have had time to collaborate on some of the ideas we are each using and | Yes- Support through Ideas |

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| | help each other through when we didn't quite understand something. | |
| Molly | Yes it did help me when I wasn't sure about the next step. | Yes- Support through Information |
| Lana | Collaboration was very helpful in this research project- yes. We were able to discuss our ideas consistently and have each other's back with information for our classes. | Yes- Support through Information |
| Elise | Yes I would say it was very helpful in the process. (How was it specifically helpful to you?) It was helpful to have someone to bounce ideas off with and to know that we all had similar issues in our classroom. That was comforting to know that we were not alone in our issues. | Yes- Support through Ideas and Consolation |
| Kristy | It was very helpful. We were able to collaborate about issues and discuss new approaches with our co-workers. | Yes- Support through Ideas |
| Sonja | In my opinion, yes it has. (In what ways?) Through having time to work together and have someone else to think about particular | Yes-Support through Ideas |

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| | situations for you. | |
| Sherry | <p>Yes it was somewhat helpful to be able to just discuss some of the issues as a group.</p> <p>My topic was different than everybody else but I still found some ideas just by discussing a little bit during our brainstorming sessions.</p> | Yes- Support through Ideas |

APPENDIX T: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW ANSWERS

(QUESTIONS 1 and 9)

Question 1: In relation to action research, how do you perceive this method and its use in your classroom?

| Participant | Question 1 Answer | Memo |
|-------------|--|---|
| Shannon | It has been useful in finding more information about Autism. (Tell me more about how it has been useful). Well, it gave me a structure to use to add a more research emphasis to my classroom. | Information About Topic; Useful; Confidence in Process |
| Wanda | I've been finding more items for the outdoors based on the research I have done. (So what is your overall perception of this method?) Positive. It wasn't as hard as I first thought. | Research-Based Answers; Easy |
| Jackie | I found that it backed up what I was thinking. (Tell me more.) It helped me to compile a ton of information about using technology that I wouldn't have had before. Our director was impressed with the research I did. <u>I was pretty impressed with myself to tell you the truth.</u> | Information About Topic; Self-Efficacy In Vivo Code: "Impressed With Myself" |
| Avery | It was easier than I thought it would be. It | Information About |

| | | |
|----------|---|--|
| | helps you gather information you need for your classroom. I would use it again most likely. | Topic; Easy; Would Use Again |
| Veronica | It helps us to be better at what we do. I found so much information to share with my families and it makes me look like a super teacher. | Information About Topic; Increased Status |
| Cora | It's good. I was able to find more resources for our school, which will make us all better teachers. I have more confidence now that I've done it once. (Does that mean you would probably use this method again?) Absolutely. | Information About Topic; Increased Confidence; Would Use Again |
| Molly | I used some of the strategies that we found when we were researching and some of them are starting to work. I had a family meeting last week and most of my parents showed up. I was shocked. I really didn't think it would make that much of a difference, but it did. (Responding to Lana's answer): We have shared a lot of ideas. The idea that got all of the parents to my meeting really came from Lana. She suggested having a door prize and | Information About Topic; Increased Confidence in Model |

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| | advertising free food and it worked. | |
| Lana | <p>It taught me to work smarter- not harder.</p> <p>Molly and I have shared a lot of ideas for our classroom and it's been better working together than separately. (Tell me how action research promoted you to work smarter.) It was just a reminder that we all need to work together because we have the same issues.</p> <p>Before I was just struggling in my classroom alone, but it's helped to work with Molly on this.</p> | <p>Promoted</p> <p>Collaboration; Less Work</p> |
| Elise | <p>How do I perceive this method? You mean action research right? (Yes.) I think it works, but I thought there would be more to it. (Tell me more about that.) I just initially thought it would be more like school work or a lot of research and time-consuming. (So, how do you perceive it now?) Not so bad. It went by pretty fast and it didn't take that much time away from the other things in my class. (Why do you think that is?) I'm not sure.</p> | <p>Fast and Easy;</p> <p>Confidence in Process</p> |
| Kristy | It's brought us all closer. We've talked more | Promoted |

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| | <p>recently than we had this whole past year.</p> <p>(Why do you think you have talked more?)</p> <p>Because we've been helping each other.</p> <p>Sometimes teachers just keep all of their stuff to themselves, but this made us talk and share ideas.</p> | Collaboration |
| Sonja | <p>(Sonja adds to Elise's last statement): I think I know why (it went by fast and didn't take away from other things in the class). It's because we've already learned how to do this when we were in school. When we had a classroom scenario that needed to be solved then we did our own research to answer the question. This is just real life application of what we learned before. (So how do you perceive action research and how did you use it in your classroom?) I like it. We all worked together really well to come up with some classroom transitions for each of our classrooms.</p> | Information About Topic; Promoted Collaboration |
| Sherry | <p>It's been fine. I've learned a lot about Autism.</p> <p>I started some of the strategies and I've</p> | Information About Topic; Useful; Not |

| | | |
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| | noticed some improvement, so that was useful. One thing was that I don't feel like I was able to collaborate as much as others just because my topic was so different, but I've been able to chime in and give some help to others. | Able to Collaborate |
|--|---|---------------------|

Question 9: Now that you have implemented action research in your classroom, how do you see yourself utilizing this type of professional development in the future?

| Participant | Question 9 Answer | Memo |
|-------------|---|--|
| Shannon | I would use it for future issues that come up that need solving. I'm already <u>thinking about</u> how I can use it for another issue I am having in my class. I feel like it worked in being able to give real information to that family about their child's autism. It was easy at first. It wasn't just like here it is hanging out there. I had to <u>do some digging</u> , <u>but I found what I needed</u> and put all of it together and I <u>feel more confident</u> in talking to them now. | Would Use Again EMPOWERED RESOURCEFUL METACOGNITION |
| Wanda | I <u>see myself being a researcher</u> . I <u>feel strong</u> . (So, would you use this type of method again | Would Use Again RESOURCEFUL |

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| | <p>in the future?) Yes, absolutely. (Tell me more about this idea of you being a researcher.) I know that <u>I can find answers</u> to my questions. I <u>won't be stuck not knowing how</u> to get answers anymore. They're out there- we just have to know where to look. And I do now.</p> | <p>EMPOWERED</p> <p>In Vivo Code: "I Feel Strong"</p> |
| Jackie | <p>I would use it for other issues that I need to research for sure. (How did it help with your topic?) It just got me started to <u>know how to find the answers</u> I needed. It gave me <u>something to think about</u> and to work toward.</p> | <p>Would Use Again</p> <p>RESOURCEFUL</p> <p>METACOGNITION</p> |
| Avery | <p>I think I would use it pretty consistently since I have so many issues in my classroom. It worked good with involving my kid's parents more in the classroom. (So you see yourself using action research in the future?) Yeah I was able to <u>try new things</u> that I hadn't tried before and then if they didn't work I would just <u>look for different information</u> or make some alterations to fit my group.</p> | <p>Would Use Again</p> <p>RESOURCEFUL</p> <p>METACOGNITION</p> |
| Veronica | <p>I like it as a professional development option. I've always liked learning how to make things</p> | <p>Would Use Again</p> <p>EMPOWERED</p> |

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| | <p>better and I <u>feel more in control</u> with this.</p> <p>(Tell me more about what makes you feel in control.) Just knowing <u>I can find the answers</u> I need quickly. I <u>use to feel like I didn't have enough resources</u>, but they are at my fingertips. (Tell me more about the resources you have at your fingertips.) Well my topic was about starting a recycling project because I couldn't stand to see us throw away so much stuff that could be used for activities or just recycled. Once I started researching about recycling, there were so many projects online that I could get ideas from. <u>I just hadn't looked before.</u></p> | RESOURCEFUL |
| Cora | <p>I'd use it again now that I know how to do it.</p> <p>I thought before that I knew basically what it was, but after getting to <u>work together as a staff I liked sharing ideas</u> and helping it all pull together.</p> | <p>Would Use Again</p> <p>COLLABORATION</p> |
| Molly | <p>I can see myself using it again to find alternative options to what is already out there. Some things don't work and it was nice</p> | <p>Would Use Again</p> <p>EMPOWERED</p> |

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| | to be able to <u>help myself rather than relying on somebody else</u> to tell me what to do. | |
| Lana | In the future I can see <u>us</u> using this to wipe out all of the concerns <u>we</u> have in our classrooms. <u>We</u> can just take one issue at a time and stomp ‘em out. | Would Use Again COLLABORATION |
| Elise | Now that we’ve gone through this once it didn’t seem that bad. I would use it again if I could <u>work with someone else on sharing the research</u> we had to do. | Would Use Again COLLABORATION |
| Kristy | I <u>enjoyed the collaboration</u> part of it, so I would like to use it again for issues that we all face. It made our <u>staff meetings more productive</u> . (How did it make the meetings more productive?) We actually <u>talked about things that mattered</u> like behaviors and solutions rather than just planning events and talking about paper work. I actually liked doing the research. I know that sounds crazy. (What was it about the research that you enjoyed?) I liked <u>finding answers and then trying them</u> out rather than always | Would Use Again COLLABORATION RESOURCEFUL EMPOWERED |

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| | <p>complaining about our problems. <u>Before, I just thought we couldn't do anything</u> because we didn't have the supplies we need. It's not all about buying new stuff... it's about using what we already have. I made some neat transition activities out of stuff I had in my room.</p> | |
| Sonja | <p>I find that <u>I am a better teacher</u> because I <u>know how to find information</u> and I liked <u>sharing ideas with my co-workers</u>. We felt <u>more like a team</u> since we were <u>helping each other</u> out. (So you would use this method again?) Yes. I would.</p> | <p>Would Use Again</p> <p>EMPOWERMENT</p> <p>RESOURCEFUL</p> <p>COLLABORATION</p> |
| Sherry | <p>I know I am in the minority on this, but I probably would not use it again. Don't get me wrong, I did find some helpful information, but I just like going to workshops and conferences <u>away from my classroom</u>. I just <u>don't feel like I can learn as much on my own</u>. (What if you were able to still attend workshops and conferences, but use this for daily issues that might emerge? Would you be</p> | <p>Would Not Use;</p> <p>Prefers more</p> <p>Collaborative</p> <p>Options- Could be</p> <p>option in the future</p> |

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| | <p>more likely to use it then?) Probably, but I would <u>rather work on something that everybody else was working on the same time</u>. I just didn't feel like I was able to get as much help as the others that had similar topics.</p> | |
|--|---|--|

APPENDIX U: EXAMPLE OF PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interview Transcripts

Participant # 1

APPENDIX C: SEMI-STRUCTURED, INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your background. You can share about your family, in a general way, and then tell me a little bit about your work experiences and your education.

Okay. I've been teaching for five years. I worked one other place besides here, but that was only for 6 months. Let's see... you wanted me to talk about my family, right? **(Yes. Just share some general information. I just want to get to know you a little better.)** Okay. I'm married with two children that are already grown. They're off building their careers. I'm real close to my mom. She has been so helpful to me through the years. Is that good? **(That's fine. You just share what you want to share.)** Okay. I love my job. I teach 4 year olds, but I have experience teaching 2's and 3's, also. Let's see... um... a good thing is that I just finished my Birth-Kindergarten degree in December and boy that was a lot of work. I'm telling you. I have never had to do so much reading in my life. You know how that is. **(Yes. I'm afraid so. Okay... so...what made you want to pursue your B-K degree?)** My mom. She really wants me to open my own daycare center, but I'm going to get some experience first. This is my second career and I'm not a young'un anymore. I just go tired of working behind a desk you know? **(I can imagine.)**

2. So...tell me what led you to work with young children, especially since this is a new career path for you?

I have always loved children and my mom kept telling me I was missing my calling, so I went back to school in the evenings to get my Bachelor's degree. My mom would love for me to open up my own place, but I looked into it and there is so much involved. I may do that eventually, but for now I just needed a job and I figured I could get some experience to make sure I would really want to do that. **(I understand.)**

3. Okay now we are going to shift gears and talk about some work related items. What is your first thought when you hear the words "professional development?"

My first thoughts... um... training, workshops, getting better. **(Tell me more about what you mean by "getting better.")** Well, I've learned some things that has helped with some things in my classroom and getting better with planning activities for the kids. It takes me a long time to do my lesson plans each week because I want to make sure I'm teaching them everything I should. **(Okay. Anything else?)** No, not really.

4. What types of professional development have you participated in?

Mostly workshops through Smart Start. I did go to the NAEYC conference the last two years. Those things are huge. **(I know.)** They had so many workshops to choose from I couldn't make up my mind and spent the first day just trying to figure out where everything was. **(They are big and it can get confusing, but they have so many good speakers and**

trainings.) I know. I was taken back by the amount of people that attend those things every year. **(I'm sure. So... have you participated in any other types of professional development?)** Not really. Just classwork from getting my degree. **(Okay.)**

5. Well this next question is about describing those experiences. Can you tell me more about the Smart Start workshops?

Yes. Um... you want me to tell you about the ones I have attended or what types of things they offer. **(You can just describe your particular experience with participating in the workshops.)** Okay. Usually I go to one or two a year just to keep up-to-date with my training. I usually pick the ones that don't interfere too much with my schedule. That can be hard sometimes because I work ten hour days four times a week which then my hours spill over into the times when some of the workshops are starting. I can usually arrange to get off in time, but it's hard to get coverage for my classroom sometimes. **(Were there any workshops that stand out that you can remember as being really helpful?)** Yeah. I liked the one about using science in your classroom because I didn't really have a lot of science items that I did before the workshop. I really can't think of any others that really stand out. I just needed the training hours. **(Were there any other training experiences that stood out?)** No. Not really.

6. Okay. Focusing on professional development, are there types of professional development in which you're drawn to participate? Why do you feel that way?

Quick and easy ones. I hate sitting through a long drawn out lecture about something that I already know how to do. **(So... why do you feel that way?)** Well... um... I just get tired of listening to somebody just talk about something. I need to be up and moving and participating to get something out of it.

7. Describe a professional development experience in which you felt it was a waste of time and did not learn a significant amount through the experience.

That was pretty much it. I think it's a waste of time to sit and listen to someone tell me something that I could read for myself. **(Are there any other types of experiences that were not so positive?)** I mean, yeah. I've had some workshops that I really didn't enjoy going to mostly because of the topic, but I just really don't learn anything through a lecture style. I don't know why.

8. Okay next question. This is the opposite. Describe a professional development experience in which you felt you learned a significant amount through the experience.

Okay. Probably the best experience has been the conferences at NAEYC. **(Why do you say that? What made that experience more significant?)** Well... for one thing I didn't have to work... don't tell my director I said that. Another thing was that we had so many things to choose from it made sure there was something for everybody. **(So... you liked the variety of topics that were available and that you could choose?)** Yes. **(Okay. Any other types of professional development experiences that**

you felt you learned a lot from?) Um... I like make-it-and-take-it type trainings where everything is hands-on. That's about it.

9. Okay. Describe what would make professional development more appealing to you.

I guess more choices. Sometimes we are made to go to certain workshops and I really don't enjoy those.

10. What do you know about action research? Describe.

I've never heard of this type of research. I assume you are going to tell me about it. **(I'll explain it more during the training.)**

11. What are your first thoughts when you hear the words "action research"?

First thoughts...hmm. Sounds like it can take up a lot of time. **(Any other thoughts?)** No. Not really.

12. Okay. What thoughts or concerns would you have about implementing action research in your classroom?

My concern would be how it will work in my class with my other planning and lessons. **(Any other concerns?)** No.

13. When it comes to professional development, realistically what amount of time are you willing to devote to training and development outside your normal work hours?

Outside of work? **(Yes. Beyond the workplace).** Um...I'll devote some, maybe five hours a week.

APPENDIX V: EXCERPT FROM FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

Excerpt from Site 2 Focus Group Interview Transcript

5/7/2014

Hi everybody. Thank you again for participating in this study. You essentially have completed the process of implementation and now we are going to just talk about some of the outcomes and hear about what you think of the process. This format is different from the other interviews in that we are all together and you'll be able to hear more about everybody else's experiences, also. I'll try to make this as brief as possible. A few guidelines are to try to only speak one at a time so nothing is missed and relax. There are no wrong answers and remember your open and honest answers will be helpful in guiding future research.

You ready to get started?

(Several answered yes or nodded their head)

Okay. Question 1. In relation to action research, how do you perceive this method and its use in your classroom?

Molly: I used some of the strategies that we found when we were researching and some of them are starting to work. I had a family meeting last week and most of my parents showed up.

That's great.

Molly: I was shocked. I really didn't think it would make that much of a difference, but it did.

Let's hear from someone else.

Lana: It taught me to work smarter- not harder. Molly and I have shared a lot of ideas for our classroom and it's been better working together than separately.

Tell me how action research promoted you to work smarter.

Lana: It was just a reminder that we all need to work together because we have the same issues. Before I was just struggling in my classroom alone, but it's helped to work with Molly on this.

Molly: We have shared a lot of ideas. The idea that got all of the parents to my meeting really came from Lana. She suggested having a door prize and advertising free food and it worked.

It sounds like you've been collaborating.

Kristy: It's brought us all closer. We've talked more recently than we had this whole past year.

Why do you think you have talked more?

Kristy: Because we've been helping each other. Sometimes teachers just keep all of their stuff to themselves, but this made us talk and share ideas.

What about you (Sherry)?

Sherry: It's been fine. I've learned a lot about Autism. I started some of the strategies and I've noticed some improvement, so that was useful. One thing was that I don't feel like I was able to collaborate as much as others just because my topic was so different, but I've been able to chime in and give some help to others.

(Looking at Elise) How do you perceive it?

Elise: How do I perceive this method? You mean action research right?

Yes.

Elise: I think it works, but I thought there would be more to it.

Tell me more about that.

Elise: I just initially thought it would be more like school work or a lot of research and time-consuming.

So, how do you perceive it now?

Elise: Not so bad. It went by pretty fast and it didn't take that much time away from the other things in my class.

Why do you think that is?

Elise: I'm not sure.

Sonja: I think I know why. It's because we've already learned how to do this when we were in school. When we had a classroom scenario that needed to be solved then we did our own research to answer the question. This is just real life application of what we learned before.

So how do you perceive action research and how did you use it in your classroom?

Sonja: I like it. We all worked together really well to come up with some classroom transitions for each of our classrooms.

Did anyone want to add anything further about your perception of action research?

(Everyone nods their head or answers no.)

Okay. Good discussion. Let's keep it going. The next question is what reservations did you have going into the process of implementing action research that now are no longer a reservation?

*(*Transcript Includes Questions 1-9. This sample only includes Questions 1 & 9)*

Okay the final question is... Now that you have implemented action research in your classroom, how do you see yourself utilizing this type of professional development in the future?

Sonja: I find that I am a better teacher because I know how to find information and I liked sharing ideas with my co-workers. We felt more like a team since we were helping each other out.

So you would use this method again?

Sonja: Yes. I would.

Molly: I can see myself using it again to find alternative options to what is already out there. Some things don't work and it was nice to be able to help myself rather than relying on somebody else to tell me what to do.

Great. Anyone else?

Sherry: I know I am in the minority on this, but I probably would not use it again. Don't get me wrong, I did find some helpful information, but I just like going to workshops and conferences away from my classroom. I just don't feel like I can learn as much on my own.

What if you were able to still attend workshops and conferences, but use this for daily issues that might emerge? Would you be more likely to use it then?

Sherry: Probably, but I would rather work on something that everybody else was working on the same time. I just didn't feel like I was able to get as much help as the others that had similar topics.

Elise: Now that we've gone through this once it didn't seem that bad. I would use it again if I could work with someone else on sharing the research we had to do.

Kristy: I enjoyed the collaboration part of it, so I would like to use it again for issues that we all face. It made our staff meetings more productive.

How did it make the meetings more productive?

Kristy: We actually talked about things that mattered like behaviors and solutions rather than just planning events and talking about paper work. I actually liked doing the research. I know that sounds crazy.

What was it about the research that you enjoyed?

Kristy: I liked finding answers and then trying them out rather than always complaining about our problems. Before, I just thought we couldn't do anything because we didn't have the supplies we need. It's not all about buying new stuff... it's about using what we already have. I made some neat transition activities out of stuff I had in my room.

So... how do you see yourselves using action research in the future?

Lana: In the future I can see us using this to wipe out all of the concerns we have in our classrooms. We can just take one issue at a time and stomp 'em out.

APPENDIX W: OBSERVATION PROTOCOL EXAMPLE

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| Observer: Donna James | Participant Observed: #12 | Action Research Topic: Strategies for orienting a child with Autism into a new learning environment. |
| Date of Observation: 4/1/14 | Time of Observation: Start 10:15 am End 10:27 am | |
| Assistance Requested: Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Describe nature of assistance requested: The participant expressed having issues in finding information related to her topic. I have printed off some ideas to share with her. Her concern is not having anyone to help her with implementing the information (she is in a classroom with no assistant). I went over the new ideas and gave suggestions of ways to implement and still be able to supervise the class as a whole. We talked about classroom arrangement to create barriers for the child with autism and still be able to see the rest of the classroom. | | |
| Describe any visible implementation of action research in the classroom: Participant has the action research handout accessible. | | |
| Describe any collaboration taking place as related to the process of implementing action research: Participant expressed not being able to collaborate as much due to being in the classroom alone. She did indicate there was discussion during staff meetings where they shared ideas. | | |
| Verify at what point the participants are in the action research process (utilize Handout 2 to identify the parts of the process): Step 3: Supporting Research and Scholarship -still researching | | |
| Describe any questions or concerns the participant has about action research at this time: Needed help with finding current research. | | |
| Additional Notes: Doesn't seem very positive about the process. Fixated on the fact that she does not have assistance in the classroom. | | |

APPENDIX X: EXCERPT FROM PARTICIPANT JOURNAL ENTRIES

Journal Entries Summary

Participant #1

- (*After Training*) “Feeling better about all of this now that I have a topic” (Sharing Information with Family about Autism)
- (*During Implementation*) “Questions I have are about where to begin looking for information. I am only finding things about autism- not really about how to share the info with the family.”
- (*During Implementation*) “I’m not sure that this would be considered a success story yet, but I can see the possibilities.” (**Memo: Shift in confidence-empowerment**)
- (*During Implementation*) “Got some help today. We talked about our topics during staff which really helped.” (**Memo: Collaboration**)
- (*During Implementation*) “Still going good. No concerns right now.”
- (*During Implementation*) “ Found some really cool information that will help in talking with XXXX’s family. They have shut me out so far, but I think I have a good start to finally get them to refer him.”
- (*During the Implementation*) “I’m really liking the information we are getting to help with this process. I like sharing ideas with each other. Going good right now.” (**Memo: Collaboration**)
- (*During the Implementation*) “I’m getting good at finding resources.” (**Memo: Confidence**)
- (*During the Implementation*) “Yeah! Feeling good about helping XXXX’s family. I’m already looking at other topics to start researching.” (**Memo: Confidence and Positive View of Action Research**)

APPENDIX Y: AUDIT TRAIL SUMMARY

Audit Trail Summary

| | |
|---------|--|
| 3/11/14 | IRB Approved |
| 3/12/14 | Site 2: Initial Interviews |
| 3/13/14 | Site 1: Initial Interviews |
| 3/14/14 | Site 2 Training (am)/ Site 1 Training (pm) |
| 3/17/14 | Site 1 (am)- Snowed (canceled Site 2 visit in the pm) |
| 3/18/14 | 3 Hour Delay Due to Weather - Site 2 (pm) |
| 3/19/14 | Site 2 (am)/ Site 1 (pm) |
| 3/20/14 | Site 1 (am)/ Site 2 (pm) |
| 3/21/14 | Site 2 (am)/ Site 1 (pm) |
| 3/24/14 | Site 1 (am)/ Site 2 (pm) Member Checks for Initial Interview |
| 3/25/14 | Met with Peer Debriefers to go over Initial Interview |
| 3/26/14 | Staff Meeting @ Site 2 (Conducted Open-Ended, Follow-up Interview) |
| 3/27/14 | Site 2 (am) |
| 3/28/14 | Staff Meeting @ Site 1 (Conducted Open-Ended, Follow-up Interview) |
| 3/31/14 | Site 1 (am) |
| 4/1/14 | Site 2 (am)/ Site 1 (pm) |
| 4/2/14 | Site 1 (am)/ Site 2 (pm) |
| 4/3/14 | Site 2 (am) |
| 4/4/14 | Site 1 (am) |
| 4/7/14 | Site 2 (am) |
| 4/8/14 | Site 1 (am) |
| 4/9/14 | Site 2 (am) and Attended Site 2 Staff Meeting/ Met with Peer Debriefers (pm) |
| 4/10/14 | Site 1 (am) |
| 4/11/14 | Site 2 (pm) |
| 4/14/14 | Did not go to either site. |
| 4/15/14 | Site 1 (am)/ Site 2 (pm) |
| 4/16/14 | Site 1 (am) |
| 4/17/14 | Site 2 (am) |
| 4/18/14 | Easter Holiday |
| 4/21/14 | Easter Holiday |
| 4/22/14 | Site 1 (am)/ Site 2 (pm) |
| 4/23/14 | Site 1 (am)/ Site 2 Staff Meeting |
| 4/24/14 | Met with Peer Debriefers |
| 4/25/14 | Site 2 (am) |
| 4/28/14 | Site 1 (am) |
| 4/29/14 | Site 2 (am) |

| | |
|---------|---|
| 4/30/14 | Site 1 (am) |
| 5/1/14 | Site 2 (am) |
| 5/2/14 | Site 1 (am)/ Site 2 (pm)- Scheduled Focus Group Interviews Based on Progress |
| 5/6/14 | Focus Group Interview (Site 1)- Member Checks for Open- Ended, Follow-up Interview |
| 5/7/14 | Focus Group Interview (Site 2)- Member Checks for Open- Ended, Follow-up Interview |
| 5/21/14 | Staff Meeting @ Site 2- Member Checks for Focus Group Interview |
| 5/22/14 | Staff Meeting @ Site 1- Member Checks for Focus Group Interview |

APPENDIX Z: PERMISSION FOR KOLB'S EXPERIENTIAL DISPLAY

Donna James 8/10/14

To: Patricia Petty



Thank you so much.

Donna James

Sent from my iPhone

Patricia Petty (pxp36@case.edu) [Add to contacts](#) 8/10/14

To: Donna James



Donna,

Thank you for asking. I see no problem, especially since you are citing Dr. Kolb in your presentation.

Best wishes in completing your doctorate degree.

Patricia

Donna James 8/10/14

To: pxp36@case.edu

Cc: Donna James



Hello-

I am a doctoral student at Liberty University and I am writing to ask permission to use the experiential learning cycle diagram in my dissertation. I am citing the diagram and giving full credit to D. Kolb. Thank you!

Donna James