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Perceptions of Middle School Teachers on the Quality of Professional Development

Safurat Anike Giwa
Loyola University Chicago

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

PERCEPTIONS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS ON THE QUALITY OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

PROGRAM IN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

BY
SAFURAT ANIKE GIWA

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
MAY 2012
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want thank all my colleagues for allowing me to share my ideas and passion for growing more effective teachers, which we all ultimately hope will lead to academic success for our students. To my friends both in and out the of the education field, I want you to know that learning comes in all forms. I have learned as much from our interactions and from serious discussions as from reading scholarly research.

To the elders of my life, my grandmother, Wosama Tukuru, thank you for guiding me in a gentle but firm manner; James Koconis, thank you for the love, encouragement, persistence, and frequent nudging to get this done. To my parents, you may not have understood the process, but you knew it was important. I thank you for watching my children so I could have uninterrupted time to truly write.

To my family, I want thank my dear sweet life mate, my husband Peter Koconis. It is easy not to see the forest for the trees but the forest is still there. As I succeed in reaching my goals, I hope you have not given up on yours. To my children, Alethea, Peter James, and Aula, you have been my inspiration for so many things. You have taught me the power of true faith and loving Allah.

Finally thank you to my committee members: Dr. David Bell, Dr. Theresa Pigott, and Dr. Beverly Kasper. Thank you for walking on this journey with me through the many starts and stops and revisions. Thank you for giving me the strength and the voice
to know that what I have to say is important. I became a scholar through this process and I hope my scholarship will enrich others.
DEDICATION

This study originated during the time I taught at a low achieving school on the south side of Chicago. For ten years, I struggled to understand how to meet the needs of my students through the professional developments experiences I received from the school and those I sought on my own. I had to accept that to become the kind of teacher and leader I wanted to be meant experiencing quality, standard-based professional developments and learning how to transfer similar experiences to teachers. These experiences were parts of the impetus for this study. Luckily, national education organizations were also embarking on the same journey.

I dedicate this study to my friends and colleagues who supported me through this arduous process. With all the hiccups that happened along the way, I learned the importance of accepting support from others. Thank you for all the support in sending me articles and the countless number of suggestions in making this study possible. Finally, I dedicate this research to my immediate and extended families, especially my three wonderful children. Thank you for making me a high quality person.
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Professional learning and professional development are the essential tools employed in schools, districts, and universities in order to increase teachers’ knowledge and skills. To gain the most from professional development in middle schools, the experiences and activities must be based on standards. Few researchers explore how teachers think about the context, process, and content of current professional development at the middle school level. This dissertation examines how teacher learning is demonstrated in professional development activities and experience and assesses whether middle school teachers’ perceptions of their professional development experiences is aligned to the standards of Learning Forward (2001) (formerly the National Staff Development Council), a national professional learning organization.

The research study used the Standard Assessment Inventory (2003) to gather the perception of middle school teachers regarding the alignments of their professional development practices with the standards of Learning Forward. Participants were members of the Association of Illinois Middle-level Schools (AIMS), who accessed the online survey via a provided by the researcher. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the participants and analyze the standards and the dimensions of the standards. The analysis revealed that AIMS teacher members are engaged in quality professional development experiences aligned with Learning Forward standards.
Interpretations drawn from this study are that middle school teachers are aware and experiencing standard based professional development and years of experience in teaching does not impact teachers’ perceptions about their professional development experiences.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Research past and present points to the need for all middle grades or middle levels classrooms to have highly qualified teachers; educated professionals that create ideas, conceptualizing theories to achieve effective instructional delivery that increase student outcomes. Currently, teachers increase their instructional and classroom capacities through professional development practices. Professional development practices or experiences and activities as terms used in this study refer to teachers learning as part of ongoing and sustained efforts to improve teaching crafts. Importantly, changes and understandings obtained from these forums are invaluable in the classroom (Thomlinson, 2001). More specifically, Rick Dufour (2007), the creator of the professional learning communities, explains that effective professional development experiences should be evident at each stage of the teachers’ own teaching and learning. Stephanie Zepeda (2008), author of Professional Development: What Works, insists that professional development experience must be systematically developed to be high quality and engage teachers through stages of their careers and experiences.

Effective professional development provides concrete strategies that has far reaching implications in increasing teachers’ professional capacities. Sander and Rivers (1996) describe teachers as “the single biggest factor affecting academic growth of any
population of youngsters” (p. 23). Eaker et al. (1992) also stressed the importance of involving teachers in discussing issues of school change and giving teachers a voice over their own professional developments and professional growth. In describing the current state of professional development, Zepeda (2008) analyzes ideas of why professional development experiences in the middle schools appeared different from the professional development experiences of yesterday (Zepeda 2008). To explain this, researcher reports significant increases in the efficacies of teachers engaged in job-embedded professional development, the creation of professional learning communities (PLC), coaching, or mentoring (Dufour 2005; Edweek, 2010; Hirsch, 2007; Zepeda, 2008).

Edweek (2011) published the article Professional Development, a re-examination of a 2004 article on professional development, to gage the progress and the state of professional development in American schools. It reported a dichotomy in the state of professional development in the United States. On one aspect, teachers are engaging in higher quality professional development activities that are impacting and improving student outcomes. On another aspect, more middle level teachers still need to deepen their understandings of research, strategies, and pedagogy that foster student learning through active participation in their own development (Edweek, 2011; Morrow, 1996; Zepeda, 2008). Professional development that are producing growths are those that are embedded in the principals of professional learning teams and common goals as outlined in most school reform policies.

School reform policies stressing teacher quality through professional development have been at the centerpiece of numerous federal legislations and local school district
accountability policies since 1957. For example, many of our nation’s educational policies from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, Individual With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975, Improving America’s Schools Act of 1991 to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) emphasize the imperative of quality teachers in every classroom, create high standards for teacher qualifications, and continuous improvement of teacher quality through continuous professional development. To explain further, the ESEA of 1965 Title II, Sections 201 and 202 (Part A) “Preparing Training and Recruiting High Quality Teachers and Principals” states:

The purpose of this part is to provide grants to state educational agencies, local educational agencies, state agencies for higher education, and eligible partnerships in order to increase student academic achievement through strategies such as improving teacher and principal quality and increasing the number of highly qualified teachers in the classroom and highly qualified principals and assistant principals in schools; and (2) hold local educational agencies and schools accountable for improvements in student academic achievement. (1965, p. 3)

Furthermore, the United States Department of Education, in the fall 1965, announced the creation of the Eisenhower Professional Development Program, its largest program to help support and improve teaching in mathematics and science to date. The program provided grants to schools and other non-profit agencies for teachers to network and collaborate on mathematics and science education. The Eisenhower Grant is credited with helping to deepen new ideas and research in mathematics and science, increasing the
strategic teaching of these two content areas, creating and highlighting the use of teacher experts, and developing strategic plans to support struggling learners (ESEA, 1965; NCLB, 2001).

Three decades later in 1995, the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) in partnership with 10 education foundations created standards and tools for professional development practices. The group designed 12 standards (see Appendix A) based on quality professional development aspirations. Organized in the areas of content, process, and context, the 12 standards provide solid frameworks of quality professional development. Context of professional development describes the school cultures and climates through learning community, leadership, and resources. Professional development that is data driven, result based, design, evaluation, learning and collaborations encompass the process areas. The content of areas of professional development are defined by the skill, knowledge, and attributed provided to teachers need to effectively implement new ideas in classrooms. “These standards also define professional development and emphasize the importance of result-oriented, collaborative, job-embedded professional development” (Roy, 2010, p. 3). Subsequent educational reforms still called for high quality professional development to improve teachers’ knowledge, skills, and understandings of students learning (Cooney & Bottoms, 2003; Desimone et al., 2002; Holland, 2005; Mizell, 2002).

During 2001, the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) renamed Learning Forward in 2010, researched 12 high poverty high achieving schools in Louisiana to understand how teachers’ engagement in professional development changes teachers’
behavior and affected student academic achievement. The main factors in the successes of the schools were the evidence of numerous approaches to professional development throughout the schools. Professional development opportunities ranged from mentoring, coaching, grade level reflection around students work, workshops, common lesson planning to attend national conferences to bring back and share information with other staff members. The researchers conclude that the common practices the Louisiana schools exhibited and practiced that made them successful consist of high engagement of professional development among the faculty and that “regardless of approaches used, however, each faculty was expected to learn, to grow, and to collaborate with their professional colleagues” (NSDC, 2001, p. 6).

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (1996; 2007) reports that, “There is a mismatch between the kind of teaching and learning teachers are now expected to pursue with their students and the teaching they experienced in their own education” (p. 84). Essential components missing in teacher learning opportunities include:

- Commitment in comprehending new ideas;
- Feedback after practice;
- Critical reflection and problem solving;
- Collaborations and connections to learning experiences;

The results of professional development experience with these missing components are failures to build effective instructional capacity. NSDC (2000, 2001,
2008) takes the position that professional development must be framed in on context, process, content, and the learner to be effective in changing student learning. Research findings illustrate the need to change ways schools support teachers’ professional learning. “We must recognize that teaching is a lifelong journey of learning rather than a final destination of ‘knowing’ how to teach. Our policy must ensure teachers have the support needed to make this journey” (McRobbie, 2000, p. 6).

To accomplish the tasks of supporting teachers’ growth, schools are adopting broader concepts of professional development experiences different from activities of the past. According to the National Staff Development Council, more school districts are adopting, data driven, result oriented, standard-based quality professional development as the vehicle for providing support and enrichment for teacher (NSDC, 2007). Professional development experiences that enable teachers to succeed embody principles of:

- Clearly defined vision linked to school initiatives;
- Realistic in meeting critical goals;
- Enjoyable, challenging activities;
- Encouraging yet firm supervisors; and
- Peer support. (Frost & Durrant, 2002; Tienken & Stonakers, 2007; Zepeda, 2008).

These characteristics allow teachers to develop effective pedagogic practices by empowering them to set goals and seek support for the change. Johnson and Kardas (2002), professors at Harvard Graduate School, conducted five years of study on 50 Massachusetts teachers to determine their level of preparedness for teaching. For teacher
lacking in adequate classroom skills, schools relied on high quality professional
development to fill the knowledge gaps. A quality professional development was the
solution for supporting and improving these teachers’ quality (Garet et al., 2001; NSDC,
2001; Spark, 1994; Sparks, 2006).

Professional development experiences generally focused on improving specific
teacher behaviors, not looking at the total experiences of teaching, Research into
professional development generally focus on the elementary or secondary levels (Dufour,
2004; Zepeda, 2008). The professional development needs of teachers had been focused
on wide ranging research with little standardization until recently. This study seeks to
address this gap in the understanding middle level teachers’ view on professional
development. The Learning Forward standards reflect beliefs that staff development or
professional development improves the learning of all students. Additionally, the beliefs
help create a foundation for the professional development standards that lead teachers to
effective professional development experiences. These standards provide the framework
used in this study to better understand middle school teachers’ perceptions.

Statement of Problem

Professor of Education at Stanford University and the Executive Director of the
National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, Linda Darling-Hammond
(2000) calls on all 50 states in the United States to better understand the effects of teacher
quality on student achievement as demonstrated by the following arguments for
improving teacher professional development experiences:
• The strongest and most consistent predictor of a state’s student achievement levels is the proportion of well-qualified teachers in the state.

• The connection between teacher qualification and student achievement persists even when additional school resource for students of poverty and limited English proficiency are taken into account.

• While class-size reduction (CSR) appears to contribute to student learning, particularly in fields like elementary reading realized above average gains when accompanied by the hiring of well-qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

“Teachers who receive substantial professional development – an average of 49 hours in the nine rigorous studies – can boost their students’ achievement by about 21 percentile points” (Yoon et al., 2007, p. iii). Quality, substantive, standard-based professional development as mandate by many federal policies on professional learning to increase teacher effectiveness takes a focus attention to provide teachers with the needed time.

Few analyses are available that specifically look at the qualities of professional development in middle schools. In one such analysis conducted at the American Institutes of Research, Kwang S. Yoon and his colleagues selected 1,300 relevant research studies on professional development from the 1986 and 2006. Just nine studies meet the standards for high quality professional development set by the Institute of Educational Science’s What Works Clearinghouse (Yoon et al., 2007). If the goals are to
provide middle level teachers substantial learning experiences then understanding professional development is critical.

Change as demanded by school reform initiatives asks teachers to play more substantive roles in developing themselves and their schools through professional learning experiences that increase the quality teaching (Fullan, 2001). This is evident in the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF) (1991) report that ranks instruction quality influenced 43 percent of student academic achievement behind parental involvement. “On the whole, the school reform movement has ignored the obvious: What teachers know and can do makes the crucial difference in what children learn” (NCTAF, 1999, p. 5).

Understanding teachers’ perceptions in professional development stems from concerns across the nation on the dismal performances of students in elementary, middle and high schools on state-standardized and international assessments. Some researchers cite the reasons for the poor performances of American students as related to class sizes, instructional materials, and students’ socioeconomics levels. The United States Department of Education documented reasons include governance, curricula, instructional methods, approaches to testing and accountability, and the recruitment and training of teachers (Koretz, 2009). Teachers are natural targets of parents, politicians, the media and other stakeholders; they are consistently blamed for poor performance of students regardless of other influences. Consequently, the goal of professional development is essentially to address the poor performances of students by training teachers to deepen their knowledge and instructional styles.
Koretz (2009) disaggregated the 2009 trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) reports and made the following comparisons of the performances of United States students in eighth grade and secondary schools with their counterparts in the developed nations. His findings stated that American students in secondary schools performed poorly compared to their peers abroad.

Eighth grade students in United States scored below average in mathematics, literacy and problem solving in comparison of the academic skills of teenagers in developed nations. For example, the mean score for United States eighth grade students on a composite of mathematics and science was fourth from the bottom of 21 participating countries. The U.S. mean was statistically significantly higher than those of only Cyprus and South Africa, although it was statistically not reliably different from those of numerous other countries, including the Russian Federation and the Czech Republic” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). However in general terms, American secondary school students performed better than their counterparts in Europe (except the Netherlands), Australia, and New Zealand but are behind Asian students (TIMSS, 2006).

Research and public opinion agree that teacher quality directly effects student learning. Darling-Hammond (2000) and others have proven through research studies the effects of quality teaching on student achievement. “Despite the growing body of literature that supports the relationships among staff development, teaching quality, and student learning, student equity, some educators and policy makers question the value of providing time and resources for professional learning” (Killion, 1999, p. 9). This lack of
commitment is challenged with the influx of federal and local policies mandated to provide high quality support for teachers.

Prior professional development studies focused supporting elementary teachers in increasing their capabilities to better teach students. For example, during the 1970s, professional development focused on increasing teachers’ classroom demonstration skills. Good and Grouws (1979) successfully conducted experiments to show low income students in second grade achieved when teachers in engage professional learning activities that mirror ways they were to instruct. Professional development studies in the 1990s focused more on problem solving and critical thinking for students and less on classroom routines (Garet et al., 2001).

Garet et al. (2001) summarize professional development and student achievement by stating that, “Teacher professional development can improve student achievement when it focused on teacher knowledge of subject matter, standards, assessments, and how students understand and learn” (p. 192). The unique needs of students served by the middle school structure necessities better understanding of the perceptions of middle grades teachers on professional development.

According to the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (1996), a critical factor in the success in reform is professional development that helps teachers to address the needs of all learners with a special focus on adolescent learners. The NSDC (1997) states, “Teachers who are life-long learners are more likely to adapt to the growing demands and challenges of teaching underperforming and struggling
students” (p. 6). There is a recognized association between effective staff development and successful educational change in schools (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997).

**Purpose of the Study**

Majority of policy reports written in the past two decades, 1990 through 2010, called for increased opportunities to for teachers to engage in quality professional development. However, the quality of professional learning experiences has been an historical problem. The following statistics from a survey conducted in 2000 by the United States Department of Education’s National Educational Statistics report that formal professional development and collaborations are high in areas of classroom activities excluding discipline and management and low in meeting the needs of diverse learners. Table 1 describes the National Commission on Educational Statistics (1999 & 2001).

As Table 1 details, professional development focused more on instructional experiences and less on understanding equity among students, for example, understanding the needs of diverse learners. Changing these statistics are the foci of the NSDC standards in the equity. There are direct correlations to increase in student achievements when teachers experience high quality professional development that focuses on contents, understanding diverse students, and traits of high quality teaching, (Elmore, 1997; NCES, 1999; NCES, 2000; Yoon et al., 2007).

The purpose of this study was to study middle school teachers in Illinois and their perceptions regarding professional development alignment to the National Staff Development Council Standards for Quality Staff Development. The study sought to
understand the teachers’ perceptions on the quality and commonalities in professional
development experiences. The study was based on an analysis of responses from the
electronic version of National Staff Development Council Standard Assessment
Inventory (SAI) and demographic questions.

Table 1

*Highlights of the Findings of NCES 2000 Survey Results on Professional Development
Experience Topics, Teacher Collaboration, and Frequency of Professional Development
Engagement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Highlight Area</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Low</th>
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<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>80% on district curriculum and standards</td>
<td>49% on the instructional needs of students with disability</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>74% on integration of educational technology</td>
<td>46% on parent involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>72% on educational assignment</td>
<td>45% - classroom management and student discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>72% on implementing new teaching methods</td>
<td>45% - meeting the needs of diverse learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>62% on student performance assessment</td>
<td>26% - meeting the needs of English Language Learners.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>69% - attended activities with other teachers</td>
<td>26% mentored another teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>62% - Networked after school</td>
<td>23% - mentored by another teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>53% - individual or collaborative research of a topic</td>
<td>26% - not likely to mentor another teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
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In 2001, using data from the National Center for Educational Statistics’ survey
responses, the National Staff Development Council revised the Standards to reflect what
teachers were stating they wanted in professional developments. The NSDC standards
serve as guideposts in creating effective professional learning opportunities for teachers. Increase research studies are needed in understanding if middle school teachers are engaging quality professional developments that meet the NSDC standards (Borko, 2004; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker & Dufour, 2005; Sullivan & Glanz, 2006).

In other instance, Chicago Public Schools placed professional development programs, activities, and consultants in the neediest schools to support teachers to meet students’ needs (Finnigan & O’day, 2001). The National Staff Development Council, the United States Department of Education and other researchers agree that when appropriate, teachers should receive external assistance to strengthen the development of the skills and knowledge acquired through active participation and reflection through the professional development (Elmore, 1997; Killion, 2001; NCES, 1999; NSDC, 2001; SEDL, 2009). The areas of professional development are defined by skills, knowledge, and attributes teachers need to effectively implement new ideas in classrooms. “These standards also define professional development and emphasize the importance of result-oriented, collaborative, job-embedded professional development” (Roy, 2010, p. 3).

**Research Questions**

This study analyzed middle school teachers’ thoughts on the quality professional development. The middle school teachers’ perceptions were examined using the Learning Forward standards for highly effective professional development practices. An examination of the following related areas guided the study:
1. To what extent are the perceptions of Association of Illinois Middle-level School’s teacher members aligned with Learning Forward professional development standards?

2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the professional development alignment in the perception of AIMS teacher members?

3. Are there significant differences in perceptions of middle school teachers’ professional development in the frameworks of context, process, and content standards?

4. Are there significant differences in perceptions of middle school teachers between length of service and subject taught and the Learning Forward standards of professional development?

**Assumptions of the Study**

A number of assumptions guide this study. All professional development experiences are not equal. Professional development experiences are needed through all the spectrums of teacher career stages. The need for professional development intertwines with the need to increase organizational and instructional capacity. Ineffective professional development cannot be identified through one causal link given the complex nature of school organizations. Factors such as student characteristics, school and school systems governance, relationship with the community, and teacher characteristics, all influence the dynamics of the effectiveness of teachers. According to Edward Deming (1986), most schools began restructuring internal organization to reflect the “big picture” model of school reform and give scant attention to teacher growth.
Evans (2004) supports ideas that professional development at the organizational and individual level has to play an important role if efforts to reform schools are to succeed (Evans, 2004, p. 7).

When reform focuses on teachers, it presumes essential ingredients are missing in the curriculum pedagogy or character of the teachers. One of the most difficult tasks is ascertaining teachers’ current level of knowledge. Teachers vary in levels of skills, teaching styles, and sense of efficacy (Danielson, 2002; Fullan, 2001; Marzano, 2003; NSDC, 2001; Showers, Joyce, & Bennett, 1987).

**Organization of the Study**

This study was about the perceptions of middle school teachers and their professional development experiences and the level of alignment to Learning Forward Standards. It began by briefly discussing the evolution of middle school as an educational tier in the United State and the impact professional development on teacher quality and the need for quality professional development based on teachers’ need. Chapter One developed the context and the rationales for conducting the research study and outlined the questions this study sought to answer.

Chapter Two was the review of the relevant literatures that will support theoretical framework of this study. The literature review is a descriptive account of the role of professional development in increasing student outcome in the era school reform. Kronley and Handley’s (2001) statement about teacher competency as an indicator of student success is reinforced by federal mandate such as Goals 2000 and No Child Left Behind. The literature review explored the influence of policy on professional
development. It defined professional development and various forms of professional development. It also looked at features of effective and ineffective professional development based on the substantive framework of the NSDC standards for quality professional development practice and the need to build capacity in teachers.

Chapter Three presented the general methodological design for conducting this research. It described the setting for conducting the research, the method of identifying the participant, and the survey instruments, procedures for collecting and analyzing data. This study used a quantitative methodology and an online survey to gather data.

Chapter Four presented the results of the survey of the AIMS middle-level teacher members. It presented the results of the SAI online survey. It provided the means or average by dimensions and standards. It also presented the demographics information answers from respondents and analyzed the raw data using descriptive statistics to determine the significant difference in perception based on years of service and years at school.

Chapter Five presented an analysis of the data and interpretation of the findings as well as the implications and recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Professional development practices are increasing the knowledge of teachers in middle schools. This chapter reviewed literature on research on quality professional development and its influence on teacher quality. The chapter described the how school reform explains the need for professional development linked to classroom practices aspired by the National Staff Development Council Standards (NSDC). Through an examination of the performance of American middle and secondary students on international assessment studies, this study underscored the need for quality professional development at middle level school using the NSDC standards as the framework for effective and ineffective professional development practices.

Organization of Literature Review

The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section analyzes professional development through school reform and the numerous federal policies created to support teachers’ professional development growth. Section two described the setting of the study, middle school and leaded into the need for effective professional development by that was highlighted in section three. Section three discussed effective professional development research as framework for the NSDC standards. Section four, five, six
included the NSDC standards with their subsets. Table 2 contains the illustrative model on the standards and their subsets.

Table 2

*The NSDC Standards and Subsets: Illustrative Model of NSDC Standards and Subset*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Framework</th>
<th>Standard</th>
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<td>Context</td>
<td>Learning Communities</td>
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<td>Leadership</td>
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<td>Resources</td>
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Adapted from NSDC Professional Development Standards

**Research Questions**

The following questions guided the study examining the perception of professional development of middle school teachers:
1. To what extents are the perceptions of Association of Illinois Middle-level Schools’ teacher members aligned with Learning Forward professional development standards?

2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the professional development alignment in the perception of AIMS teacher members?

3. Are there significant differences in perceptions of middle school teachers’ professional development in the frameworks of context, process, and content standards?

4. Are there significant differences in perceptions of middle school teachers between length of service, and subject taught and the Learning Forward standards of professional development?

**Middle School**

The larger context for this study is the middle school. Middle schools in the United States comprise one-third of the kindergarten through eighth grade school structure (NMSA, 2006). In the 1950, reform studies initiated efforts to highlight the importance of the middle school structure. In 1968, William Alexander and his colleagues in their landmark book titled *The Emergent Middle School* were among the first educators, researchers, and policymakers to make strong arguments for the introduction of middle school as a distinct tier serving as a segue for students for elementary school and junior/high school. Their central tenet was that the traditional six-three - three education structure inadequately served interests of students who end their childhood education at the age of 10 or took into consideration developmental,
psychological, growth, cognitive and emotional issues associated with students older than 10 years.

Studies attest that children at the ages of 10 through 14 are treated younger at the elementary/junior tiers while teachers at the high school tiers treat them more as young adult. Unfortunately, according to Alexander, adolescents are neither of both thus a tier that will treat children of 10 and older as “in-between middle ages” known as middle school was imperative. Alexander proposed a middle school system either from grades five through eight or six through eight grades focusing on rigorous academic, emotional, and maturation development of 10-year olds to full adolescences.

Alexander and his colleagues further proposed the curricular content of middle schools and how teachers should be recruited and specifically trained to instruct middle school students. Other recommendations were team building, exploratory experiences, modular scheduling, team teachings, individual counseling, independent studies, and discovery learning methods of instruction, curriculum developments, and continuous professional development. There were only 1,100 middle schools in the United States when Alexander and his colleagues wrote The Emergent Middle School in 1968. Four decades later, virtually all public school districts across the nation have incorporated middle school concepts into their educational system (Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 2002).

Since the 1980s, the concept of middle school has been endorsed as “an attempt to reform the traditional junior high school structures to create and educational experience more appropriate for young adolescents” (RAND, 2004, p. 112). In the late 1970s and
1980s, most researchers, politicians, and the public ignored middle school or junior high schools. Middle schools were called the Bermuda Triangle of education and blamed for increases in behavior problems, teen alienation, disengagement from school, and low achievement (RAND, 2004). Creating exemplary middle schools to meet the challenges of addressing the academic and developmental needs of the adolescents’ drives the emphasis on middle grades reform (The Forum, 2010; NMSA, 2006; NASSP, 2009).

In 2004, the RAND Corporation set out to evaluate the current state of middle schools in America. The study found more supports are need for teachers in middle schools. The middle school years have always been challenging, a fact that is now compounded by the need to prepare teachers with the knowledge and the capacity to educate the changing adolescents.

The less than optimal conditions for teaching and learning and the inadequate levels of implementation of promising practices in middle school might also be associated with the fact that many middle school teachers lack knowledge about their main subject areas and about developmentally responsive instructionally and classroom management methods. (RAND, 2004, p. 116)

The solution for these finding was that to provide teachers with high quality, well implemented, and evidence-base professional development to compensate for the lack of knowledge and skill.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Middle School Association and the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform are
promoting and advocating middle school reforms, research activities, and conferences. These organizations disseminate new research, support educators, administrators, and policy makers in discussing and creating greater urgencies in the middle grades schools. The guiding principles of these organizations are rooted in the Carnegie Corporation of New York funded reports *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, 1989, *Turning Points: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century*, 2000 and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* to strongly advocate the importance of middle schools as the ‘last best chance’ of meeting the needs of adolescent learners. *Turning Points 2000* explains that, “Too often, though, the main educational institution serving young adolescents – in the middle grades school – fall short of meeting the educational and social needs in millions of students” (p. 3). A common tenet among these organizations is to challenge schools to create environments for adolescent student. All three aforementioned organizations agree that the success of middle schools will be driven by the activities and responsiveness of teachers.

As more middle schools move toward results-driven, evidence based teaching practices; teachers will have monumental influence on the successes or failures of these reforms (NSDC, 2009). Researchers and practitioners are shifting paradigms (Kuhn, 2000; Spark, 2006) in understanding teachers’ view of reform as it relates to their own learning and understanding the influence of professional development on their teaching practices. This kind of impact can only occur with the help of schools leaders and others helping to facilitate the process. Professional developments experiences of teachers provide underlying support structure for school improvement and discontinue the
troubling contradictions that delay true middle school reform (Murphy, 1991; Yoon, 2007). The context standard has three subsets of learning community leadership, and resources.

**School Reform and Professional Development**

The goal of school reform is to achieve high quality instruction for all students (Coburn, 2003; Cook, 1997; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Scher & O’Reily, 2009). Teachers must develop technical, reflective, and collaborative expertise for changes to student learning to occur. Achieving higher levels of student understandings require immensely skillful teachers and schools organized to support continuous learning (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Throughout this literature review, the researcher will use school reform and education reform interchangeably.

The Walter H. Annenberg Professor of History at University of Pennsylvania, Michaels Katz provides the best definition of school reform through his work in the Chicago reform movement in 1992. Katz (1992) stated that the meaning of school reform moves far beyond legislative acts. Schools engaging in the reform process are explicitly stating a need for change. Reform outcome is a change process that is ongoing and unfolds over time. These changes are best understood in the context in which they take place. Societal and individual responses to the change will affect their behavior and practice of teachers engaging in the process. In school reform, changes occur on broad perspectives with little respect to individual schools or community. Changes through educational reforms mirrored that broad point of view of changing societies (Guskey, 1994).
Most researchers agree with Horn’s (2002) assessment that education reform is most often commenced when education is not meeting the goals of certain groups in the population or governmental interest in promoting specific mandates. Education reforms are battles to legitimize the values and the views of activist stakeholders and are often conducted for functional, social, and philosophical causes or in more common terms – product, process, and functional purposes (Horn, 2002; Ravitch, 1983). All aspects of education and its reform efforts are best encapsulated by these three situations of teaching (Roy & Hord, 2003). Professional development can be viewed as micro level of education reform – a mini reform usually taking place in individual classroom. Change through professional development activities placed individual teachers at the center.

Reform through professional development asks teachers to deepen their content knowledge and their strategic instructional knowledge usually tied to the implementation of content or knowledge. Reform asks teachers to adopt, give up, or adapt a new knowledge, values, and skills in an active process (Smith, 1982). School reform advocates realize the importance of supporting teachers through teacher training programs normally referred to as staff or professional development.

In early reform literature, professional development of teachers, separate from earning teaching credentials in the early years of education, was accomplished through individual pursuits. Teacher development focused on the attainment of credential. Teachers increased their content knowledge and expanded their teaching strategies regarding classroom management or implementation of specific content programs on their personal initiative, whenever possible. Through the review of literature on the
school reform history, it was difficult to find examples of detailed accounts of organized professional development until the launching of Sputnik in 1958 (Horn, 2002; Ravitch, 1983).

The importance of the work of teachers in reform began in the 1960s with congressional passage of the National Defense Education Act. As the nation needed more teachers for math and science, this act created opportunities for more professional learning (Ravitch, 1983). Universities and policy institutes developed curricula and instructional strategies to help teachers improve their work. Professional development during this era was sporadic and did not reflect the daily classroom experience and most school professional development characteristics still reflected the factory models of education from the 1900s (Ravitch, 1983).

The publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 made restructuring and reform parts of the education vocabulary (Pierce & Hunsaker, 1996). In 1983, Secretary of Education, T.H. Bell bolstered this reform rhetoric against ineffective schools when he labeled such schools as “a rising tide of mediocrity.” Teachers’ professional development was considered a key component in bringing about improvements in schools, because “there is recognized link between staff development and educational change” (Spark & Hirsch, 1997, p. 2). Teachers’ professional learning was also one of indisputable aims of the National Education Goal 2000 that well equipped teachers are critical to reform efforts (Dilworth & Imig, 1995).

Similarly, the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* of 2002 also emphasized the importance of building competency through effective professional development in the
nations elementary and secondary school students by stating in Part B titled “Student Reading Skills” and Subpart 2 titled “Early Reading First” Sections 1201 to 1208 and Sections 1208 to 1225 respectively that all elementary school students in the nation must attain reading proficiency by the third grade. NCLB directed all school districts to ensure that their pupils/students achieve reading proficiency by this grade and schools that need money should be adequately funded to achieve this goal. Students who do not meet the reading proficiency goal at the eighth grade should not be allowed to transit to high school while schools that do not attaining the goal as an institution faces closure.

Professional development in education is part of the reform effort of many school districts. The idea is that as teachers increase their professional capacities; students will increase their learning (Guskey, 1986). However, this notion has not have the effect as expected in many schools. “Unfortunately professional initiatives have been criticized for their failures to produce significant changes in either teaching practices or student learning” (Feist, 2003, p. 30). These failures are compound by some teachers refusing to adopt new approaches for teaching such as learner centered teaching (Cuban, 2001).

Historically, teachers struggled with policymakers, administrators, and outside providers for more involvement in shaping policies. According to Cuban (1993), teaching practices have not kept pace with our increasingly complex societal demands. In 1988, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advance of Teaching studied the teacher’s role in reform. Ernest Boyer, head of the Carnegie Foundation, wrote, “We are beginning to discover that outside regulation has its limits. Education is a human enterprise with
teachers and students interacting with each other. There is just so much that can be accomplished by directives from above” (pp. 1319-20).

Faced with increasing accountability demands from the private and public sectors, today’s practitioners are seeking the best ways to solve to assist in the complex problems of educating all students. Professional development moved into a series of seminars or workshops instead on one day activities, thereby allowing teachers to gain a greater breadth of knowledge for deeper understanding (Dalellew & Martinez, 1988). It focused on teacher-learners as intrinsically motivated, particularly on developing themselves in order to improve student learning (Darling-Hammond, 1999).

As the professional development gained more popularity, teachers took charge of their learning. Most teachers accepted interventions as means of enhancing their skills and strategies however; others were more reluctant to accept outside help. Teachers’ resistances to efforts to change their practices were those who often had experienced several waves of reforms previously. These teachers were also wary of reform initiatives because it comes reform normally meant a loss of autonomy. Michael Katz (1992) summarized the teacher’s role in school reforms.

Teachers’ skepticism and caution reflect sound instincts, for they usually play an ambiguous role in school reform. Although reformers have criticized teachers harshly, they have expected them to transform their practice-by themselves, with guidance from outsiders, or under pressure from laypersons lacking professional knowledge and skill. Reform in fact frequently places tremendous burdens on teacher, whose effective
workload expands with no compensating increasing in authority or pay. (p. 2)

Joyce and Showers (1988), Rosenholtz (1989), Barth (1990), and others have advocated professional development reform through improving teacher performance. Eaker, DuFour and Bennett (2004) have provided some ideas for implementing professional learning community. They provide frameworks for school but do not endorse one set method of developing the concept of a learning community. The works of these researchers are grounded in the premise that effective teaming will yield effective learning regardless of existing challenges within the school (Eaker, DuFour & Bennett, 2004; MacGilchrist, 1998).

**Professional Development**

Professional development is a process to improve teacher classroom performance. Most often, the goals of professional development include improving professional skills, knowledge, or attitudes. Professional development experiences encompass areas of training from readiness activities, to practice, and coaching, to support activities (Guskey & Spark, 1991). Professional development experiences high in quality provide resources for teachers to expand their abilities - a catalyst spurring teachers to take action. It stimulates teachers to raise their understanding of education and strengthen their willingness to make changes that will improve students’ learning. French (1997) states that true professional development should be self-motivated and collegial.

The American Educational Research Association (2009) defines professional development as the diverse activities, which teachers participate in outside the classroom
in educating the youth. These experiences provide training in specific research methods and skills; cover significant research issues in related disciplines and specialized areas. The experiences address professional development issues focus on research for the improvement of practice, or examine recent methodological and substantive developments in education research (American Educational Research Association, 2009).

Professional development is an effective tool used to meet the challenge of guiding all students to achieve high standards set forth by local, state, and national mandate. Teacher quality diminishes and trivializes all other schooling factors that have historically concerned people such as parental support, absenteeism, and demographics (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). According to Hawley and Valli (2000), the focus on effective professional development of teachers and how it effects student achievement and learning is a worldwide phenomenon. Unlike our international counterparts, in 2000, the average teacher in the United States received an average of one day’s worth professional development a year. Teachers in Japan, Switzerland, Germany, China, and other countries received an average of 10-20 hours a week for professional development. “Teachers have time each day or week when they do not work with children but, instead, plan curricula, lessons, and evaluate on another’s teachings” (McRobbie, 2000, p. 6).

The National Staff Development Council (2007) affirmed that the need for increasing professional development has been widely accepted, while numerous studies stated that overall professional development during the decades of reform has been insufficient (Borko, Bull & Buechler, 1996; Killion, 2002). Critiques of staff development during the 1980s complained that past professional development
experiences were mostly characterized by workshops, which were relatively short with little follow-up and evaluation. This indicated poor level of implementation of the content. “These workshops often presented teaching skills isolation from curriculum content, workshops often resembled a collection of puzzled pieces that the participants were left to integrate on their own” (Joyce, Wolf, & Calhoun, 1993, p. 14).

Other forms of professional development includes sessions attended on volunteer basis by school administrators and teachers during summer breaks or workshops organized by professional associations and organizations in which some school administrators or teachers played leadership roles. These forms of professional development were extra-curricular activities; teachers who attended them were not required to use the learning methods gained; accountability methods were virtually non-existent; the duration of such activities were never monitored and the competence and qualifications of the professional development providers were not ascertained.

Spillane et al. (2002) noted that the 1990s in the United States began a new era when the need for teachers to engage in cultural rethinking and transformation. The dire need to improve the reading performances of students across the nation’s public school districts covertly brought about re-organization of professional development as a formal structure as a part of teacher training and re-training. Teacher are learning of new methods in content areas, understanding the employment of new technologies for instructional delivery, and a gain the ability to accommodate the growing needs of student populations in demographically changing and heterogeneous and complex nation (Lawless & Pellegrino, 2007).
The new mantra for professional development calls to teachers help to create professional development through collaboration and reflective practices (Dufour, 1999, 2007). Teachers lead the process to increase academic, scholastic and pedagogical skills through cross-fertilization of ideas. Mentoring and nurturing create the appropriate forums for new ideas to be articulated, tested and eventually adopted into school curricular. The mantra reflects NSDC Standards for Staff Development.

As teachers learn and improve their practice, disconnects between practice and student learning disappear. Teachers are able to take greater ownership of their professional activities and schools become communities of caring, learning, and inquiring (Sergiovanni, 1996, 2006). “If our aim is to help students become lifelong learners by cultivating a spirit of inquiry and the capacity for inquiry, then we must provide the same conditions for teachers” (Sergiovanni, 1996, p. 52).

**Effective Professional Development**

Schools invest significantly in teachers who are knowledgeable on current and effective practices pertaining to classroom instruction. High quality and effective professional development serves as a bridge in meeting the challenge of supporting students in achieving higher standards of learning and development (Goals, 2000). Sparks (1984, 2006), Guskey (1999, 2003), Dufour (1999), NSDC (2001), Joyce and Showers (1983, 2002), and others compiled researches on the attributes of effective professional developments. They found that professional development must be comprised of several specific components in order to engage the adult learner.
All professional development experiences should ensure that teachers have the necessary the school environment, social coping mechanism, and the proper support levels to be successful in the classroom. As shown on Figure 1, all aspects of effective professional development are connected. Lines rather than arrows are drawn to illustrate the connection. Failure of one part makes the entire process ineffective.

![Figure 1. Theoretical Structure of Effective Professional Development Experiences with the NSDC Standards](image)

Professional development experiences must be intensive, experiential, connected to the classroom, collaborative through data, research, reflective practices, and sustainable during implementation. Professional development must also have the proper leadership to support and nurture the work teachers are attempting to accomplish. The aforementioned researchers confirmed that notable gains towards improvement when the three domains of teacher effectiveness: cognitive, cultural and social skills of teachers, which are targeted (Pelt, 2009). Standards provide the aspiration of high quality professional development. The standards of professional development treat teachers as professionals with the skills, aptitudes and knowledge to become more effective and
serve the needs of all students when they reach all the 12 goals. The schema of the standards is divided into three concentrated areas of context, process, and content.

The standards are organized into context/process/content schema developed by Georgea M. Spark (1983)(cited in NSDC, 2001). The context standards describe the culture of organizations which learning communities, leadership, and resources thrive. The process standards described professional developments that are data driven, research based, appropriately design for teachers’ need, understands the learning needs of adults, and provided opportunities for collaboration. The content standards seek quality professional development that expands rigorous training for teachers. The standards ensure that teachers understand and appreciate differences in students and their families, hold high expectation for them, provide safe nurturing classrooms, and involve communities and other stakeholders. All aspects of the standards must be evident in professional development. If one ignores one dimension of the NSDC standards then the intended results are far less likely to be achieved (NSDC, 2001).

**Context**

The context standards explain the need for professional development embedded in deepening teachers understanding of all students through supportive leadership, an environment that fosters a professional learning community, and appropriate resources. Teachers demonstrate this understanding by providing students with safe, clean, and appropriate classroom environments.
Learning Communities

Professional development involves all stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, and students sharing a common vision. Professional development in a learning community is becoming the norm of operation in middle schools. Activities of learning communities consider what teachers should learn as well how they should learn it (Wilson & Berne, 1999). A professional learning community embeds teacher learning into the school day and it is part of the regular life of the school (Wested, 2000). It shifts teachers from working in isolation to working collaboratively and reflectively (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999; Little, 1990).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) explained learning communities as creating the opportunity available for individuals to learn collectively, connecting to the greater agenda for social and school change. In this setting, all parties, veteran and novice, come together for ongoing collaboration focused on the practice of teaching and learning. Understanding comes from the abilities to construct knowledge by critically comparing teaching practices, creating connections between students and communities, and outside partnerships.

Quality professional development makes sure connections transform classrooms while teachers maintain the expertise. For example, the United States Department of Education awarded National Awards Programs for Model Professional to eight schools in 2006 and 2007. Schools were awarded prizes for producing substantial growths in student achievement through professional development. Although diverse in ethnicity and socio-economic status, these schools proved that student achievement is possible
when teachers focused on developing the framework for working together to build on student learning. Experts and novice solve common problems by working together to produce a common product (O’Connor, 1999; Rogoff, 1991). Conducting professional development work based on the reality teaching is the hallmark in creating learning communities of effective professional development practices.

**Leadership**

The most essential ingredient in effective professional development is the quality of the school leadership (Guskey, 2000). Competent leadership is vital to the development of effective schools and the professional development activities of teachers (NSDC, 1994). The school leader or the principal is important to the success in highly interactive professional development learning communities (DuFour, 1991). Principals play a key role in creating the conditions, which results in effective schools. In his study of selected high schools, Boyer (1983) found that schools with high achievement levels had and a clear sense of community. It was invariably the principal that made the difference, a finding consistently supported by the research on effective schools.

Principals take the lead and provide leadership through their vision, support, and commitment to the process and content of professional development. Principals allow for buy-in and ownership of the professional development experience (Spark, 1992). Leaders assist the school community in developing a clear vision of what professional development means to the schools and how it would benefit students. A shared vision should be clear to every member of the institution. School leaders should fully commit to
the continual growth of all staff members and be lifelong learners themselves (NSDC, 1994b).

Principals support and encourage risk taking by staff members without fear of adverse consequences. They create a positive atmosphere of safety where change and experimentation are welcome (Spark, 1992). The school atmosphere is open and supportive for teachers to thrive and become successful. Most importantly, the leaders and principals model the risk taking behavior by sharing their own success and challenges (NSDC, 1994b).

The principal sets the stage for professional development by collaborating with all stakeholders to plan, implement, and evaluate professional development activities (Spark, 1992). Leaders involve teachers as early in the professional development process as possible. Teachers come together to assess theirs and other’s professional needs on an ongoing basis. “This collaborative process should continue through the establishment of goals, objectives, identifications of the most appropriate practices, implementation processes, and ensuing program evaluations” (p. 44).

Leadership in professional development experiences is not limited to principals. More schools are moving to the idea of shared leadership. Teachers and other teacher leaders can also be active facilitators of professional development activities. Teacher groups working together and assuming leadership positions is at core of the professional learning community (Zepeda, 2008). Teacher leaders focus learning experiences with openness.
Resources

Teachers need many resources before, during, and after professional development. One form of resource that many school districts have yet to fully integrate into their pedagogic systems is technology. Either because of inadequate resources, absence of technology-driven personnel or a combination of both, the professional development organized in some school districts lack technology content. The need for technology as an important tool in instructional delivery and professional development was underscored by the Department of Education (2004) when it initiated the Enhancing Education Through Technology (EETT) program and stated in its Goal 8 “…to facilitate the comprehensive and integrated use of educational technology into instruction and curricula to improve teaching and student achievement” and further stated in Goal 8:3 “…to provide professional development opportunities for teachers, principals and school administrators to develop capacity” (EETT, 2004, p. 3).

Other education scholars (Goldman, Lawless, Pellegrino, & Plants, 2005-2006; Newman, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001) agree with the Department of Education that technology helps teachers tremendously in educational improvement, learning and student outcomes in addition to saving time, providing new approaches to solving issues and better instructional delivery. For example, Gersten et al. (2010) advocates that a good and effective professional development experience infuse with technology to formulate, collaborate, and evaluate experiences targeted stakeholders in elementary and secondary schools.
Technological infused professional development experiences should contain the same following four elements other professional development experiences. First designers and organizers of the professional development must spell out the importance of the professional development, which must integrate conceptual understanding of theories and research-based works and their practical application. In other words, teachers and administrators should be able to put the various theories of learning, motivation, outcomes, and current research experts in the field into use when teaching.

Secondly, professional development should be ongoing and must sustain active learning by teachers and administrators. Education is a lifelong activity and with the advent of instructional technology, which has changed the way, teachers teach and students learn it is imperative for teachers to continually professional development update their knowledge. Sulla (1999) notes “teachers must be offered training using computer but their training must go beyond that to the strategies needed to infuse technological skills into the learning process. Technology application in instruction must move beyond practically to an in-depth sustain assistance (Kanaya & Light, 2005).

Third, a well-developed and purposeful professional development for school teachers should emphasize the nurturing of collegial spirit and support networks among teachers and between teachers and administrators while finally, elementary and secondary school teachers should be taught how to streamline their pedagogical curricular with existing standards and technology in order to achieve coherence. Technology has the potential to provide equity in learning if teachers have the right training and provide access for all students (Ringstaff & Kelley, 2003).
**Process**

The NSDC process standards provide the “how” professional development. These standards of professional development are about understanding practices that have had demonstrated impact on adult learning priorities. Practice standards include understanding data, research, design, learning, collaboration, coaching, and evaluation. Procedures in professional development are about using multiple sources to gage the effectiveness of professional development. It is about providing the opportunity and guidance for teacher collaboration for research based professional development. Bull and Buechler (1996) stated that professional development activities grounded in participants’ questions, inquiry, experimentation, as well as research are effective.

**Data Driven**

In the age of accountability and evaluation, data is difficult to ignore. Every state board of education, through the passage of NCLB in January 2001, is asked to collect, house, analyze and make instructional decisions based on data (NCLB, 2001). Understanding and using data is also important for teacher to better understand student performance. Mitchell, Lee, and Herman (2000) prompt educators to understand or be data literate. The right data for teachers can play an effective role in ensuring addressing the needs of underperforming students.

Data driven professional development can take many forms. Data can inform teacher based on classroom, school, district level, and federal level. Classroom level data type of data can be used to inform professional development on student achievement, instructional and curriculum decisions, and assessment types among others. “Educators
and policymakers need systematic analysis of the data collected on the effectiveness of various interventions and pilot programs designed to improve student performance” (NCREL, 2004, p. 4).

As stated earlier, teachers in the United States have drastically different professional experiences than their international counterparts. “Teachers in Asian countries and European countries spend the time difference on “preparation, joint planning, collegial work, observation of other teachers, research and lesson demonstration” (Darling-Hammond, 1999, p. 33). In the earlier research of adult learners, Dalellew and Martinez (1988) stress that the teachers attempt to gain knowledge only when the need is evident and applies to what they are currently doing. This data suggest needs for increase professional develop opportunities for teachers. A good command of data through job-embedded professional development promises a big payoff in student success and school success (NCREL, 2004).

Research shows that teachers sustain continuous improvement through professional development that reflects the needs of their students. Ferguson (1991), Carpenter (1989), and other researchers have identifies the relationship between professional development experiences, teacher quality, and student achievement. In 1991, Ronald Ferguson (1991) conducted research in 900 school districts in Texas. This research compared achievement results with teacher quality, initial teacher licensing examination scores, and experience. He found a difference of 40% in both reading and math scores when an expert teacher was in the classroom. However, when supported
with quality professional development, novice teachers experience similar success (Ferguson, 1991).

Thomas Carpenter (1989) and his colleagues conducted an experiment with first grade teachers. The researchers divided the teachers into two professional development groups. Group one focused on meta-cognitive learning. Group two focused on instructional strategies. The results showed teachers in the professional development group focused on learning how students learn used higher level of questioning, engaged students in the process of thinking through problems, and encouraged group work. In contrast, the second professional development group focused on instructional strategies focused on lower level questioning based on recall, getting quick answers, worked individually. Quality professional development focused on the process of learning yield high quality of instruction.

According to Matsumura et al. (2009), effective professional development should be authentic the participants to institute theories of educational practice to the classroom and school settings. A good professional development is contextually designed and situational in application. Job-embedded professional development provides real life applications in response to current challenges. For example, problems plaguing school districts across the nation differ from one another. School districts in Border States are coping with large influx of immigrants every year or those in the mid-west and the south coping with large population of at risk students (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Sparks, 2002). Thus professional development for teachers address disparate needs is different from school districts to school districts yet focused diverse learners.
The same related issues confront people within individual districts charged with designing professional development for districts with large numbers of students with unique demographic profiles. Credible research supports the use of data to inform decision-making process. Stanford University researchers, Martin Carnoy and Susanna Loeb (2002) studied the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores and changes in states accountability policies. Results show that the state had the stronger accountability systems scored high on the NAEP.

Brian Jacob of Harvard University conducted a finer-grain analysis to determine the correlation between higher test scores and heightened accountability policies. He determined schools that emphasized the use of data had improved mathematics and reading. Consequently, the type of professional development for teacher knowledgeable in content area of instruction but may face serious challenges on maintaining discipline in the class will be different from the practitioner grappling with meeting of the needs of multicultural students. In other words, a professional development that is generally designed without addressing specifics classroom situations based on data will be ineffective in improving instructional delivery and student performances (Donovan, 1987; Dunne, 2002).

**Research-Based**

Professional development that is research based is an effective professional development that is situational and contextual; a workable experience based on reflective experimentations. Teacher and administrators engage in reviewing current research and then interpret the results to make it applicable and adaptable to their classrooms (Dunne,
Teachers expand their professional lives by moving beyond pedagogy to critically examining what is taking place to learning more about their subject matter and students; questioning their practices as they face difficulties; and collaborating with other teachers for improvement. In essence, teachers perform mini-informal individual research and share the results with colleagues (Danielson, 2002).

Professional development provides reflective opportunities for participants (Matsumura et al., 2009). An effective professional development experience allows administrators and teachers to reflect on facets of their administrative and pedagogical performance (Eaker, Dufour, & Burnett, 2004). A reflective professional development challenges teachers to examine other areas of their instructional style hitherto unexplored and provides time self-evaluation that may present new opportunities to address negative trends in their schools (Talbert & McLaughlin, 2006; Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008). Professional development experiences create school environments to encourage teachers’ inputs in the professional development planning process that allows teachers and administrators to practice concepts and innovations and creates opportunities for receive feedbacks on practices (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Youngs, 2001).

**Design**

Pre-service teachers are defined as teacher with limited teacher experiences and are entering the profession. They often limited knowledge of how to engaging parents and spend the first few years in the profession surviving conferences (Ponticell & Zepeda, 1996). However, the lack of community relation strategies are balanced by the understanding effective professional development began in their college preparation.
programs (Pelt, 2009). In most colleges and universities preparing students for careers in education, non-academic skills such as learning how to use, adjust, received strategies from professional development are the new standards. Candidates are encouraged to try novel theories and innovations with students. All these techniques are geared to creating an invigorating, enlivening classroom atmosphere and improved student learning. Some ideas were not taught to veteran teachers (Pelt, 2009).

The results when these educators eventually begin to teach in the classroom are that they “learn them on the job.” This is when professional development resources become important which enables teachers to learn to set goals, seeking out appropriate resources, implementing evidence-based ideas, put them into the classroom. Garet et al. (2008) pointed out that purposeful, well-organized and well-planned professional development resources lead significantly to improve teachers’ knowledge and enhanced student performances. Teachers take knowledge from professional development into classrooms.

Since professional development has many components and aspects, choosing designs based on school curricular, instructional innovations, guidelines, and evaluation process teachers and administrators can follow in studying research-based practices (Gersten et al., 2010). In general, professional developments activities share common fundamental goals of the three important stakeholders in the school setting: teachers, administrators, and students (Zepeda, 2008).

Many problems have been identified with how some school districts organize professional development for teachers. There is extant body of literature (Bobrowsky,
Marx, & Fishman, 2000; Supovitz & Zief, 2000) that decried the attitude of some school districts offering professional development to their administrators and teachers on volunteers basis while Adelman et al. (2002) noted that there are not enough hours devoted to professional development in many school districts. Concentration on how administrators and teachers can effectively collaborate to change the school culture by building alliances with other important stake-holders such as parents, political leaders and the community especially in heterogeneous and ethnically diverse schools professional development research is minimal.

**Collaboration**

Isolation is a formidable barrier to professional development because it inhibits the climate of collaboration (Leithwood, 1990, as cited in Dufour, 1991). When collaboration is not the norm, teachers routinely lock themselves into their classroom and “do their own thing” (Spark, 1992, p. 44). Previously in the school setting, teachers rarely had the opportunity to work with each other, receive feedback, exchange ideas, and practice from each other (Dufour, 1991; Goodlad, 1984). Observations of teachers rarely allowed teachers to ask critical questions about their teaching practices.

Schools addressed on the issue of teacher isolation by structuring the schools days to promote collaboration. Administrators and program coordinators placed teachers in teams according to subject areas or grade levels. “Teachers participation in school-based activities is likely to produce positive and long lasting change; such activities provide the basis for transformative learning” (NCES, 1999, p. 28). Teachers are now share common planning time, demonstrations, identify, and solve problems together, and share ideas
(Bull & Buechler, 1996). Bull and Buechler also provide a list of the following activities designed to reduce teacher isolation and enhance collaboration in schools:

- Common planning time
- Discussion groups
- Peer study groups
- Peer coaching
- Committees with decision making powers
- Leadership Teams
- Teacher Network
- Computer Network

By challenging the dominant assumptions of teacher autonomy, teachers receive opportunities to work collaboratively and all members of the teaching staff become accountable for improvement (Roy, 2010).

**Coaching**

The traditional image of teachers working in isolation no longer fits into the new paradigm of professional development experiences. Teachers work together to analyze, discuss, and share experiences (Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008). Some researchers make distinctions between collaboration and coaching. Collaboration as a form of the coaching model of professional development supports teacher implementation of strategies through modeling, coaching, and problem solving (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001).
Effective professional development emphasizes social interaction and collaboration between teachers. The desire of various school districts across the nation is to meet the goals established by the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) has cause school administrators engage the services of coaches to help foster to help sustains the efforts of classroom teachers in professional development efforts (Desimone et al., 2002; Garet et al., 2001; Talbert & McLaughlin, 2006; Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008).

School districts such as Chicago, New York, Florida with available funds have brought full time literacy coaches and reading specialists’ to increase professional development experiences of their reading teachers. Districts that could not afford to hire of full time reading specialists and literacy coaches employ part-time professional development “experts” to engage in the continuing training and re-training of their school reading teachers. As Matsumura et al. (2009) disclosed the duties of literacy coaches who are also called reading specialists are to help schools to “meet ambitious reform goals for instruction and learning. Instructional coaching, in its idealized form, intends to create the types of sustained, instructionally focused; collaborative interactions in schools that research and theory suggest are most effective for improving instructional quality” (Matsumura et al., 2009, p. 656).

Teacher mentor guide others through the process of classroom implementation. Collaborative coaching process involves observation, discussion, feedback, and support (Bull & Buechler, 1996). Bull and Buechler explain coaching as interactions taking place between colleagues unlike the commonly held notion of the dominant to subordinate relationship found in athletics. In “peer coaching,” teachers assist their peers in teams.
“These teams are members of the school faculties who are divided into groups to regularly observe one another’s teaching and provided helpful feedback” (Joyce & Showers, 1983, p. 14). Collaborative environments involve sharing knowledge among educators and coaching provides this kind of environment.

Joyce and Showers (1983) identified four important components of coaching:

A provision of companionship - The result of the relationship is the possibility of shared successes and challenges, reflective of mutual problem solving, reflection, and perceptions.

A provision of technical feedback - The coaching has a built-in mechanism for feedback, retraining or re-teaching, and continuous dialogue that leads to refinement and real growth of skills.

Analysis of application - Opportunity is available to observe the implementation process and make necessary corrections.

Adaptation to the students - There is an allowance for adaptation as teachers learn new skills and students assimilate new concepts.

According to Matsumura et al. (2009), when school districts began to create innovative ways to meet new challenges the results should include new forms of helping to sustain high quality professional development experiences. Instructional coaching on instruction in classroom setting increases the likelihood of sustaining activities prolonging the experiences to address teachers needs (Sowder, 2007).
Learning

The efficacy of teachers directly influences the confidence he or she brings into the classroom. When teacher self-confidence is high among teachers, they are more effective in the classroom. There is direct link between teacher thinking and student outcomes. A focus on these ‘invisible’ skills of teacher helps generate new possibilities, increase instructional flexibility and focus on outcomes, not problems (Costa & Garmston, 1994, p. 112). Teachers with high efficacy will are more willing to learn, adopt, and adapt new instructional strategies in their classrooms. They take greater care of their students’ needs and are less likely to give up on or criticize failing students (Guskey, 1998).

Research has found that a teacher’s sense of efficacy tends to diminish the longer he or she is in the profession (Hebert, Lee, & Williamson, 1998). As negative experiences, or students learning difficulties challenge teachers; teachers’ views about teaching shifts toward the negative. According to Guskey and Passero (1993), while age does play a factor, attitude towards the profession influences teachers’ professional growth. The longer a teacher is in the profession, the more disempowered the teacher feels, and is less likely that teacher is willing to increase his/her professional learning. Research provides answer to address teacher disempowerment. Bandura (1997) found that “compelling feedback forcefully disrupts the pre-existing disbelief in one’s capabilities” (p. 82). Providing disempowered teachers with coaching may help to ignite more satisfaction in teaching. Developing teacher networks helped teachers maintain changes to their attitude toward teaching. Moreover, as teachers increase their capacity,
they are more likely to experience high efficacy level and more likely to contribute to the profession (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003).

**Evaluation**

In any given school year, many changes occur that teachers have no control over such as new staff, or administration, or new curriculum. Major changes have some bearing on the development of teachers. As new administrators or district initiatives require teachers to make adjustments, little time is devoted to the change process. Teachers become unmotivated and discouraged by the perceived lack of freedom and are unwilling to take necessary risks.

Teachers have numerous reasons for not adopting skills or knowledge gained from professional development. Teachers often counter new strategies and ideas with a belief that these initiatives will be temporary and subject to the whims of the policymakers. Veteran teachers who have experienced a multitude of mandates are more likely to be disenchanted with new policies (Shedd & Bachrach, 1991). Possible lack of control creates tension between the directives over which directions professional development approaches should proceed. Teachers lacking familiarity with new concepts often believe they are not receiving the support necessary for implementation. Those struggling with designs or models prefer the guided practice of immediate coaching as professional learning occurs.

The need to establish consistency and stability of program ideas is not often explicitly stated during the course of professional learning experiences. Professional development seeks to move beyond one-time fixes that permeate current teacher thinking.
The belief of “this too shall pass” can be countered disappear with the application of a change process promoting personal and collective growth. Change in staff or administration should not signal a change in the requirement of professional learning.

The lack of substantive evaluation methods for professional development means teachers’ voices are not heard when changes are made to programs. Program design or re-design do not reflect the needs of the schools; they may not reflect the needs of teachers (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006). Most were not thoughtful or sensitive to teachers’ challenges and the processes of change. Professional development programs placed much of the emphasis on formal activities rather than the personal growth of teachers. The evolution of teachers as learners lacked critical consideration as more demands are made on teachers’ time and attention (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006).

The professional development often overloads teachers. The depth of change requiring more flexibility and time are not allowing for practice before other new topics are introduced (Youngs, 2001). Time is needed for teachers to experience, adjust, and adjust again when necessary. Teachers like all other learners need time to be able to question the experiences in order to accept the claims made by presenters (Young, 2006).

Content

The content of most professional development programs and experiences focuses on quality teaching, equity, and active parents and community involvement. The issues of student and teacher equity garnering attention as the number of diverse learners soar in the public middle school (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Studies show that some teachers may face obstacles in understanding their students and the students’ culturally background.
This is linked to pre-service programs that may fail to provide teachers with tools to overcome challenging culturally issues (Donovan & Cross, 2002). If the quality of teaching does not reflect in parents’ actively engaged in children’s education then quality teaching will lack a dimension that makes equity impossible. More involved parents will garner extra care and attention on their children while parents that do not engage find that the extra care their students need is often lacking. How to engage parents is skill that does not come naturally to some teachers (Epstein, 2001; Nye, Turner & Schwartz, 2006). Professional development can help teachers acquire the skills that can increase to contribution of parents in the education process.

**Equity**

Professional development that promotes equity in schools and classroom understands the need to address the difficulties of meeting the needs of diverse learners. Miller and Losardo (2002) describe special needs students as presenting most challenges to novice and veteran teachers. Student categorized as special needs make up 35% of the total student population. Special needs students include all students identified as at risk for poor educational outcomes including those with named disabilities (Smartt & Reschly, 2007). Although special needs students can come from many racial and ethnic groups, the predominant amount are African American or Hispanic (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

In addition to these disadvantages, poor children are typically handicapped by substandard and unequal educational opportunities. But of all educational disparities
poor children face, none is more significant than the disparity in the quality of their teachers (NPTARS, 2005, p. 3).

Teachers make an enormous difference in the achievement of students. In the mid-1990, a study in Dallas conducted by Jordan, Mendro, and Weersinghe (1997) to replicate the teacher effectiveness study of Sanders and Rivers from 1996 in Tennessee. The researchers supported Sanders and Rivers claim that teachers affect students’ achievement level and that affect is cumulative and longitudinal. Professional development must provide teachers with tools, knowledge and strategies to increase the achievements of all students.

The ESEA and IDEA provisions support professional development that is evidence based, data driven and result oriented in teachers’ understanding of the need for diverse learners. Professional development should strive to replicate research interventions that have demonstrated merit and success as outline in the NCLB Act of 2001. Professional development must close the teachers’ knowledge gap and student achievement gaps by outlining scientifically based instructional strategies that connect to students in meaningful ways. In additional to evidence base instructional practices to increase achievements of diverse students, professional development must go beyond the academic needs of students and make teachers culturally sensitive. Teaches must be prepared to engage in transformative learning that challenges their and students’ psychological habits and development new points of reference about each other (Cranton, 2000).
Quality Teaching

The National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching (2000) along with Learning First Alliance conducted a symposium that brought together groups of researchers and selected schools districts administrators determine the commonalities of effective professional development practices. The group reiterated the findings of the National Staff Development Council (2002) and others. For staff development to have any impact on learning, professional development activities must be part of the daily lives of teachers. All activities must be job related and job embedded, ongoing learning, and directly linked to student learning and classroom instruction.

According to Hill, Rowan and Ball, (2005) and Ball, Thames, and Phelps, (2008), teachers pedagogical knowledge is a spectrum of knowledge. Teachers’ pedagogical knowledge refers to the basic skill, strategic, and behaviors in the classroom (Brophy, 1986; Salinas, 2010). Teachers’ content knowledge is must be linked to the needs student, the nature of the subject, and the act of teaching itself. This understanding enables the active practice of changing the nature of learning (Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008).

Demonstration of professional activities moves beyond the normal understanding of activities. Demonstration describes the physical process in which teachers begin to embrace change within their classroom. This new repertoire of professional development asks teachers to first shift their thinking and become like their students as they learn new skills, new content, and new strategies. Demonstration of skills and knowledge from staff development activities must be modeled. Teachers should live the experiences they
expect to provide to students. By adopting this stance, teacher learning is active and implementation issues are addressed prior to full classroom use.

Second, teachers demonstrate skills or activities for each other in a safe school based setting. As teachers practice the skills and activities in a safe environment, they receive corrective feedback. Other teachers are able to interjection possible real working conditions to make scenarios more applicable to the classroom setting. Teachers Who Learn (2000), a WestEd publication, explained that ongoing support through demonstrations, modeling, and coaching helps teachers to deeply reflect their instruction and curriculum to understand their effectiveness. To become more effective, Speck and Knipe (2001) stressed that teachers responsible for each other ongoing learning needs by is critical to support professional learning. Curricula and classroom instruction should be driven by the responsiveness to the outcome of demonstrations.

**Family and Community Involvement**

Parent and community involvement at the middle school have lack strong research. In general, most data on parent and community involvements are anecdotal or evaluation of programs. True experimental research on teacher professional development and parent and community involvement is not available. Often teachers lack the formal training on how to deal with diverse families and how to engage parents that have “checked out” in student learning due to the paucity of available research on effective parent engagement (Jeyne, 2007). Professional development can prepare staff to work with parents beyond the negative relationship associated with teacher-parent relationship
in the middle and high school (Shamow & Miller, 2001). Professional development must focus on training teachers and staff to enlist the support of parents and guardians.

The scant research available does illustrate the need for parents to maintain communication and active participation in the children's lives beyond elementary grades. Parent and community involvement is essential for the success of all students especially adolescents. Research demonstrates middle school students that have strong parental involvement benefit. Henderson and Berla (1994) conducted a meta-analysis of 66 studies on the relationship between parental behaviors and student learning. They determined the effect of parent involvement as determinants in student having:

- Positive attitude toward school
- Higher attendance and graduation rates
- More homework completion and return
- Fewer placements in special education
- Greater enrollment in postsecondary education. (Henderson & Berla, 1994)

Children with involved parents are more successful including recent immigrants, students from low socio-economic background, student with diverse needs (Carter, 2002). Parent involvement increases the likelihood of students taking more advantage of higher educational opportunities (Jeyne, 2007; Mapp, 1997).

Schools are making great effort to involve family in school as emphasized in the NCLB Act. Title I of NCLB provides funding for schools to collaborate with parents. The money can be used for parent training, childcare and transportation for parent to attend school functions (NCLB, 2001). Joyce Epstein, the director of the National
Network of Partnership School at John Hopkins University, created a center to help disseminate the importance of family involvement and provide interventions. The center promotes family involvement designed on six main activities that are different from the naturally occurring parent involvement such driving children to schools. Activities such as parenting communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community has spawn many programs engage parents through multi-dimensions opportunities.

Some schools have organized structures for communicating with parents. The most common means of communicating with parents has been the teacher/parent conference (Bird, 2006). With increasing access to parents through technology, more schools have embraced web portals for providing updates. Teachers role focus on providing communication regularly to students parents. Other forms activities that invite parents into schools are special events, volunteer opportunities, parent education and special outreach programs. For example, the Teacher Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) successfully promote greater homework participation in students with non-English speaking parents. Van Voorhis (2003) found students in this and other similar programs had high grades in science than non-participating students. These activities seek to bring parents in the school directly as partner in students’ achievement.

**Summary**

In the past, the groups pushing for educational reform were outsiders; those although involved in education were, not directly involved in the daily operations of schooling. However, improvement efforts in schools could not be controlled solely by
the influences of outsiders; change cannot happen unless participants and stakeholders are part of the discussion. In the past two decades, the solution for reforming education gradually shifted from reformers, philosophers, and politicians to researchers, school districts, community members, principals, and most importantly, teachers.

For quality professional learning to happen, school districts must have high expectation for students and adults, coordinated standards for curriculum and assessment, and professional development embedded in the daily practice of teachers.

The review of literature explained the role and the need for quality professional development in improving instruction. If current research on high quality professional development is plausible, then teacher quality is significant in changing the kind of teaching taking place in classroom. The researcher outlined key areas of high quality professional development in the structure of context, process, and content in the NSDC standards. Without these important components involving context, process and content, other professional learning supports become ineffective. Moreover, collaboration, feedback, and on-going reflection must be embedded as part of the practice of professional learning.

School reform found its way from a theoretical construct to the structure of the classroom. Schools improve; many stakeholders band together for the goal of influencing student instruction. Research studies present us with impetuses for quality professional development (Fullan, 2002; Halli & Valli, 2002; Little, 2002). This research will contribute to the endeavor of adding to the understanding of middle school teachers’
perception of the qualities professional development experiences through the NSDC standards of context, process, and content to inform policies that support teacher learning.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the perception of quality professional development among middle teachers. This study explored the understanding of the participants’ perceptions of the context, the process and the context of professional development based on Learning Forward standards. Numerous researchers have focused on professional developments, professional development activities (Bull & Buechler, 1996; Danielson, 2002; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Guskey, 1990; Joyce & Showers, 1987; Marzano, 2003; Zepeda, 2008) and building learning communities through professional development (Dufour, Eaker & Dufour, 2005; Eaker, Dufour, & Burnett 2004; Fullan, 2000).

The overarching questions that guided this study focused on developing better understandings of teachers’ perceptions. The questions were: what are the overall perceptions of Illinois middle school teachers regarding the qualities of professional development experiences and what are the strengths and weaknesses of professional development in middle schools in Illinois? An examination of the following areas guided the study in answering the questions:
1. To what extent are the perceptions of Association Illinois Middle-level Schools’ teacher members regarding professional development aligned with Learning Forward professional development standards?

2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the professional development alignments in the perception of AIMS teacher members?

3. Are there significant differences in perceptions of middle school teachers’ professional development in the frameworks of context, process, and content standards?

4. Are there significant differences in perceptions of middle school teachers between length of service, and subject taught and the Learning Forward standards of professional development?

**Researcher Role**

Bogdan and Biklen (2003) stress critically awareness of the researcher’s role in the study. “If you want to understand the way people think about their world and how those definitions are formed you need to get close to them, to hear, and observe them in their day-to-day lives” (p. 31). Moreover, as a reflective and conscience practitioner, the researchers’ acknowledge that her own history of working in middle school and participating in professional development experiences affected the study. This position also gave the researcher unique additional insights to the urgency, the need to gather the data, and the usefulness the data from study will generate.

The researcher was responsible for all aspects of the study. She was accountable for the review of literature, administration of the survey, and the analysis of data. The
researcher protected the rights, welfare, and confidentiality of the participants in the study by maintaining the highest ethical conduct during this process. She kept all data from this study secured in a locked cabinet in her home office destroying all collected confidential data at the conclusion of the study. The researcher had no knowledge of the teachers participating in the survey. There was no direct contact or relationship between the subjects and the researcher.

**Research Design**

For the purpose of this study, the researcher utilized a quantitative survey by the National Staff Development Council. The NSDC Standard Assessment Inventory (SAI) design correlates with the research on quality professional development practices. Danielson (2002), Marzano (2003) and Eaker, DuFour, and Burnettes (2004) and other research studies and literatures on effective school-based professional development experiences correlate to the NSDC standards. The study consisted of survey data collection methods using multiple attempts. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2001), the methods of gathering data through multiple trails increase response rates. Selected teachers will have three opportunities to complete the on-line demographic and survey instruments.

Anderson (1990) defines the researcher’s role as “collecting virtually all the data and interpreting, analyzing, and recasting the issues and questions as the data collection” (p. 161). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that concepts of reliability and validity can be extracted from constructing an inquiry. Professional development experiences create multiple realities for teachers. This multi-site research study attempted to find the “fluid
realities” shaped by the professional development experiences of middle school teachers. This study learned about a group of teachers in an in-depth manner regarding perceptions of professional development (Martella, Nelson, & Marchand-Martella, 1999).

Fowler (1988) describes the survey design as the best means of gathering data from a population sample through the process of asking questions. A survey provides quantitative or numeric description that allows for generalization of the findings to the population. Surveys are reliable because they allow for the similar answers from different people. The purpose of this study design was to gather a cross section of perceptions of selected middle school teachers.

A survey was advantageous for this researcher because of economy of use and design. It allowed for prompt return of data (Babbie, 1990; Fowler, 1988). Survey data represent personal description by responders based on the educational experience, knowledge and opinions of the respondents (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

**Instrument**

Learning Forwards Standard Assessment Inventory (SAI) instrument was used to collect data for this study. The SAI assessed the quality of school-based professional development programs and help to improve professional learning (SEDL, 2009). The SAI is normally used at the school or district level to assess, diagnose, and align professional development programs with the Learning Forward framework standards. The SAI is a 60-item survey that takes approximately 20 minutes to complete. There are five items for each of the 12 standards. According to SEDL (2003; 2009), construct
validity did not support 12 standards because some standards overlapped, “the analysis of the psychometric soundness of the SAI indicate that it is a reliable and valid measure of the degree that schools’ professional development programs reflect the actions and activities in the NSDC standards (SEDL, 2003, p. 11).

The SAI was created in 2003 in partnership with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL). This collaboration was based on a need to for a tool to assess the NSDC standards. Initially, the survey consisted of 100 items. SEDL experts the pilot the SAI for reliability and validity to help narrowed the items further to the current number of 60. Although some of the standards overlap, the study uses the breakdown of five items per standard (SEDL, 2003).

In 2003, three pilot studies on the SAI were conducted to determine the reliability and the validity of the instrument. Twenty schools participated for each pilot. In conjunction with helping to decrease the amount of items, the teachers participating in the pilot also helped to change the responses from a seven-point Likert scale to a five-point scale. In 2006, another pilot study was conducted in Georgia to determine if there are causal link between the use the SAI and student achievement. The results indicate correlation evidences demonstrated the validity of the SAI (SEDL, 2009).

SAI survey is written in a positive statement format that avoids ambiguous statements and hypothetical situations (SEDL, 2003). The standards are interspersed through the survey. Respondents will respond using a five-point Likert scale linked to occurrence statements of: Never, Seldom, Sometimes, Frequently, and Always. The
normal option of neutral was not included because this would allow some teachers to opt out of answering.

The researcher purchased the SAI from the National Staff Development Council. No modification was made to the survey because its reliability and validity was demonstrated through numerous iterations. In addition to the SAI survey, a demographic information page was added at the start of the survey. The researcher obtained information on respondents’ gender, ethnicity, years of experience, and years at the school. This information enabled the researcher to compare teachers’ perception based on their backgrounds.

Participants

The participants of the study were middle school teachers in Illinois who are members of the Association of Illinois Middle-level Schools (AIMS) organization. AIMS was organized by a group of Illinois educators to advocate for best practices for middle level education in 1976. AIMS is an Illinois affiliate of National Middle School Association since 1977. AIMS is one of the largest organization dedicated to promoting and improving instructional at the middle-level.

According to the AIMS website, the composition of its members consists of teachers, administrators, and university representatives who represent all regions in Illinois. These members represent every type of schools that serve adolescents regardless of the basic grade configuration. Memberships are accepted at the individual and institutional level. Approximately 70 Illinois schools have membership in AIMS. Most members join as organizations as Network School. AIMS membership is fairly
representative of the Illinois middle grades or middle level teacher population. Network schools assembly for two major institute yearly, the November Network and the Summer Splash. The two gathering brings middle school teachers and administrators together to collaborate and share instructional and management techniques.

**Procedures**

The researcher sent a letter to the director of AIMS requesting her assistance in using the AIMS membership database as a source for the participant for this study (see Appendix B). The director of AIMS agreed to assist the study as indicated in letter of cooperation (see Appendix C). A survey link and introductory email was sent to the director of AIMS to forward to the membership. This strategy of soliciting participants into a study is described as purposeful sampling. Through purposeful sampling, the participant to self selected to complete the survey items. Two weeks after initial contact, the director of AIMS sent out a reminder email that stated the rationale, the procedure, and the website for participating in the survey. The introductory email explained the study to teachers who are emailed the survey link (see Appendix D).

The letter to the teachers also addressed all the research consent and confidentiality issues. Since the items on the survey do not pose greater than minimal risk, the direction to the survey included a statement informing participants that continuing the survey implied consent. Participants were also informed of their option to discontinue the survey at any time. Survey response was anonymous as no personal identifying information was collected. Data collection occurred in two phases to obtain a high rate of response and span approximately six weeks.
The participant letter provided teachers with the survey directions. Teachers were asked to log on to an encrypted website. Teachers asked to participate in the study completed the demographic information page and survey. The demographic information asks for school type gender, ethnicity, years of service, and years at selected schools. The survey instruments contains 60 question items asking teachers’ perceptions of professional development experience on the areas of content, process, and context that are divided into 12 standards. There were five items for each of the 12 standards. Completed demographic fact sheet and survey imply consent from teachers to participate in the study. Appendix E provides a copy of the survey instrument. Data from the survey and any correspondence will be saved on a USB data drive and destroyed five years after the completion of the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began when respondents completed the surveys. After eight weeks, the survey portal closed to teachers. The researcher logged on to the website and followed the directions provided in the Coordinator Manuel to access the Reports portal. Learning Forward provided initial analysis of the demographic information. At the researcher’s request, raw demographic and survey data were transferred into EXCEL spreadsheets and sent in an electronic mail. The raw data was then transferred into SPPS Version 20.

New variables were created for each of the following Learning Forward standards: learning community, leadership, resources, data, evaluation, research based, design, learning, collaboration, equity, quality teaching, and family involvement. Survey
items corresponding to individual standards were averaged to create these variables. This method allowed those with at least one missing data point to be included in all analyses involving the dimension scores and yield dimension scores that are consistent with the Likert scale. In a similar manner, variables were created for each of the overarching dimensions: context, process, and content. Cronbach's Alpha was calculated by SEDL (2003) to determine the internal validity (inter-item reliability) of the standards and dimensions. Table 3 illustrates the questions distribution across the standards and dimensions provided by Learning Forward.

Table 3

Standards and Corresponding Questions Based on SAI Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension Framework</th>
<th>Standards</th>
<th>Questions items linked to standards</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Learning Communities</td>
<td>9, 29, 32, 34, 56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>1, 10, 18, 45, 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>2, 11, 19, 35, 49</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data Driven</td>
<td>12, 26, 39, 46, 50</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Design</td>
<td>15, 22, 38, 52, 57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>6, 23, 28, 43, 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>3, 13, 30, 54,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Research-Based</td>
<td>4, 14, 21, 25, 36</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>17, 20, 29, 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>24, 33, 37, 41, 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Quality Teaching</td>
<td>5, 16, 22, 56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family and Community</td>
<td>8, 31, 40, 47, 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from SAI plan for districts by Patricia Roy (2007).
Descriptive statistics were used to describe the participants of the study. In addition, the standards and dimensions were also analyzed using descriptive statistics. Box plots were created to examine the overall distribution of the teacher’s perceptions and answer the research questions.

To compare dimensions based on the experience of the teacher, teachers were placed in three groups: new, intermediate, and experienced. New teachers are defined as teachers with less than five years of experience. Intermediate teachers are defined as teachers with between five and nine years of experience. Experienced teachers have ten or more years of experience. These groups were compared within the three frameworks described above.

Summary

This chapter describes the methodology used in conducting this study. It defines the researcher’s role and the possible influence on the study. This chapter describes the structure for the design and procedure. The instrument for the survey and demographic information is described. The chapter also described how data was collected and analyzed.

Middle level educators referred to in this study are a small but significant group. The main reason for selecting AIMS teacher members as the population was to ensure that only middle level educators were accessed. AIMS members are the Illinois affiliates of the National Middle-Level School Association. Both organizations advocate nationally and internationally as voices for issues and policies focused on adolescent
learners. Both organizations have monthly publications and yearly conventions for its members.

As a non-profit organization, general membership information is not available to the Public under the Freedom of Information Act. Therefore to gain access to teacher members, a request was made to the president of the organization seeking her assistance with the study. The President agreed to forward the researcher’s participant request to middle level teachers in AIMS. Once Loyola University Chicago’s Institutional Review Board approved the research, the participant request letter was sent to the president. The researcher sent the email letter to the president to distribute. The email briefly described and explained the study and the intent of the survey. Concurrently, the researcher gained permission for the use of SAI-Learning Forward Survey. This survey was set-up through a remote website link for six weeks. Participants accessed the survey through the link provided in the Participant Request letter.

The survey items were collapsed into Learning Forward standards and corresponding framework dimensions by averaging items linked to the each standard and dimension. This method allowed those with at least one missing data point to be included in all analyses involving the dimension scores and will yield dimension scores that are consistent with the Likert scale. The standards and dimensions were analyzed using descriptive statistics and box plot. Therefore, both central tendency and dispersion were assessed. Groups were formed based on the number of years of teaching to compare dimensions based on experience level of teachers. Results are presented in textual, tabular and/or graphical formats.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study is to examine and analyze the perceptions of AIMS teacher members. The study sought to determine the extent of that professional development experiences were aligned with the frameworks of Learning Forward’s standards for highly effective professional learning practices. This chapter provides a description of the sample and analysis of the results of the survey. Further, the chapter presents the findings to answer the guiding research questions:

1. To what extent are the perceptions of the Association of Illinois Middle-level teacher members regarding professional development aligned with Learning Forward professional development standards?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the professional development alignment in the perception of AIMS teacher members?
3. Are there significant differences in perceptions of middle school teachers’ professional development in the frameworks of context, process, and content standards?
4. Are there significant differences in perceptions of middle school teachers between length of service, and subject taught and the Learning Forward standards of professional development?
**Demographic Information**

The following are the descriptive demographic information of the participant in this survey. The target populations for this study were all teacher members of the AIMS organizations. The survey was sent to 50 members of teacher AIMS. After the initial six weeks and additional two weeks that the survey window was opened, 34 teachers responded for an overall return rate of 68%. The survey included demographic items to understand the makeup of the survey participants. The following summary of the demographic descriptive information was downloaded from the report portal of the SAI Learning Forward survey created for this group and tabulated by the Learning Forward’s data manager.

A majority of the respondents were female (86%, n=29), while nine percent (n=3) were male. In addition, more than half of the respondents had been in their current school for five or more years (53%). Table 4 shows the distribution of years of service at current school for all participants.

Table 4

*Years of Teaching at Current School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Service at Current School</th>
<th>Percent of Sample</th>
<th>Number of Individuals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-1 years</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 years</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9 years</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20 years</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 or more years</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Response Rate: 96%
To better understand the experience of the participants, the next question asked if participants had direct teaching duties. Within the sample, 84 percent of participants had direct teaching duties, while 16 percent did not. Table 5 shows the distribution of overall years of service for individuals with direct teaching duties. Most of those individuals (86%) with direct teaching duties have over five years of teaching experience.

Table 5

*Years of Experience for the AIMS Teacher Members with Direct Teaching Duties*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Years of Experience</th>
<th>Percent of Sample</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-1 years</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 years</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9 years</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20 years</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 or more years</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Response rate: 97%

The next demographic question asked respondents about the grade taught. Respondents were allowed to choose more than one grade level. Fourteen teachers indicated that they only taught one grade level, while three teachers taught two grade levels, and 10 teachers taught three grade levels. Results showed that all grades are similarly represented in the sample since 16 teachers indicated they taught sixth grade, 17 teachers indicated that they taught seventh grade, and 17 teachers indicated that they taught eighth grade.

Table 6 gives the result of the next demographic question. This question examines the subject taught by the respondents who had direct teaching duties. Again,
teachers were allowed to select more than one response subjects taught. The Language Art/Reading category had the highest percentage of teachers with 44 percent.

Table 6

Subject Taught by AIMS Teacher Members with Direct Teaching Duties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Percent of Response to this Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Art/Reading</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine Arts</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Language</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and Consumer Science</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational/Technical Education</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English as a Second Language</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Education</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science/History</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The last demographic question examines the amount of teaching the participants are involved in on a daily basis. A majority of the teachers (82%) with direct teaching duties taught from 91-100% of the time. Table 7 shows the breakdown of teaching percentages.
Table 7

**Percent of Daily Teaching Time**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Percent of Responses to this Question</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 10%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-50%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-60%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61-70%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71-80%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81-90%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91-100%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Analysis**

After completing the demographic information for the survey, respondents answered 60 questions of the Learning Forward Standard Inventory Assessment (SAI). The following are analyses of the research questions for this study using descriptive statistics and box plot. The raw survey data were analyzed to examine the AIMS teacher members’ perceptions and were aligned with Learning Forward standards and dimension framework. In addition, teachers were compared based on the years of experience of the participants. Since there were many more females than males in the sample, gender differences were excluded from the analysis. Similarly, analysis on school types and school sizes are also excluded from this discussion. The following section summarizes the finding for each of the research questions.
Research Question 1: To what extent are the perceptions of the Association of Illinois Middle-level teacher members regarding professional development aligned with Learning Forward professional development standards?

To determine to the extent teachers’ perception of professional development is aligned with Learning Forward standards, box plot show the distribution of individual scores. The box indicates the central 50 percent of the distribution and its position on the graph indicates the overall teacher agreement with each standard. Higher boxes indicate positive perceptions. Descriptive statistics were used to help describe the graphs.

Figure 2 provides a box-plot for each of the 12 standards. The boxes for “Leadership”, “Equity”, and “Data Driven” show the highest level of professional development alignment. Table 8 provides the descriptive statistics for each standard. Again “Equity” and “Leadership” standards are having larger averages of 3.45 and 3.28, respectively. In addition to the central tendencies of each standard, the variability in responses was also examined using box plots. The evaluation standard has the most variability in responses; this is supported by the largest standard deviation, .830. Conversely, the “Equity” standard had the most consistency in responses, with the lowest level of variability, supported by a standard deviation of .388. Both the “Design” standard and the “Family Support” standards had individuals with views outside the norm, as indicated by the outlier values on the graph.
Research Question 2: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the professional development alignment in the perception of AIMS teacher members?

Again, the box plots and descriptive statistics in Figure 2 and Table 8 were examined to describe the strength and weaknesses among the teachers’ perceptions and the alignment to the Learning Forward standards. According to the box plot, strengths include “Leadership,” “Equity,” and “Data Driven” while weaknesses include “Learning Community,” “Evaluation,” and “Family Involvement.”
Table 8

*Descriptive Statistics for Learning Forward Professional Standards*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standards</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning Community</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>.623</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>.480</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>.527</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>.533</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>.830</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Based</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>.723</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>.642</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>.519</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>.502</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>.388</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Teaching</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>.461</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Involvement</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>.684</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Research Question 3: Are there significant differences in the perceptions of middle school teachers’ professional development in the frameworks of context, process, and content standards?*

To answer this question, Box plots and descriptive statistics were examined to understand the differences in the three dimensions: context, process, and context. Similar box plot across dimensions in Figure 3 indicate that there are no major significant differences in the perceptions of middle school teachers regarding the frameworks of context, process, and content. This is supported by similar means and standard deviations reported in Table 9. The box plots indicate that although there are not any main differences in these frameworks, teachers have a slightly higher perception of content than the context and process frameworks.
Figure 3. Distribution by Framework

Table 9

Descriptive Statistics for Dimensional Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension Framework</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>2.9031</td>
<td>.47327</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>2.8699</td>
<td>.52486</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>3.0757</td>
<td>.42344</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question Four: Is there a significant difference in perceptions of middle school teachers between length of service, and subject taught and the Learning Forward standards of professional development?

Teachers were grouped into three level of experience to examine the differences in perceptions of teachers towards the framework and the groups. The three groups consist of new teachers (less than five years of experience), intermediate teachers
(between five and nine years of experience), and experienced teachers (ten or more years). Box plot were analyzed to determine if difference between groups exist. Teachers were not compared based on the subject taught since some teachers belong to more than one subject group.

Figure 4 compares experience groups across the context framework. The three groups have similar perceptions with experienced teachers slightly higher than the other two groups. Figure 5 compares experience groups across the process framework. This graph shows that the intermediate group was consistent in responses, as seen in the low variability in the box plot. The intermediate group had a single individual with a more negative view than other individuals in the group. Figure 6 compares the experience groups across the content framework. The box plots of the experience groups were very similar for the content framework.
Figure 5. Process Framework by Experience

Figure 6. Content Framework by Experience
Discussion

The analyses conducted in this chapter of the study revealed that AIMS teacher members are engaged in quality professional development experiences aligned with Learning Forward standards. While there were not significant differences in the dimension frameworks, teachers’ perceptions of the content were slightly higher than the other frameworks. In addition, years of experience do not appear to affect the perceptions of teachers within these frameworks.

Summary

Chapter Four reported the results of the study. The quantitative study consisted of the demographic analysis to understand the sample and descriptive analysis to understand the results of the survey in relation to the research questions posed in this study. The study results indicated teachers believe their professional development is aligned or to the Learning Forward professional development standards and that this belief is consistent across the three dimensions of the framework and across different levels of experience.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Professional development is far more prevalent in schools than in past decades (Zepeda, 2008). The aims of this research study were to better understand professional development practices in the middle schools and to determine if the teacher learning experiences were aligned to Learning Forward standards. Chapter Five of the study reviewed the key concepts, the rationales, and discusses of the key findings. Finally, the final chapter discussed the implications of this research for future policies, practices, and research.

Problem of the Study

The study sought to help address the problem of research on professional development in middle schools. Specifically, the study sought to understand the state of professional development at the middle levels or middle grade and to conduct analyses to determine the alignment of middle school teachers thinking on professional development to the Learning Forward standards. Others rationales included teacher quality, substantive, standard-based professional development and the federal as mandates on professional learning to increase teacher effectiveness. If the goal is to provide middle level teachers substantial professional development experiences then understanding
professional development is critical area of research that must be further explored further (Yoon et al., 2007, p. iii).

**Purpose of the Study**

This dissertation sought to contribute to the understandings of middle school teachers’ thinking on professional development as compared the Learning Forward standards. This study increased available data to inform policies makers, school districts, support teachers’ learning and build professional learning capacities in increasing student achievements. Similarly, the study sought to understand the teachers’ perceptions on the quality and commonalities in professional development experiences.

In 2001, using data from the National Center for Educational Statistics’ survey responses, the National Staff Development Council revised the Standards to reflect what teachers were stating they wanted in professional developments. The Learning Forward standards serve as guidepost in creating effective professional learning opportunities for teachers. Increase research studies are needed in understanding if middle school teachers are engaging quality professional developments that meet the Learning Forward standard. The study is a quantitative study of the teacher members of the Associations of Illinois Middle-level Schools and their perceptions. The study is based on an analysis of responses from the electronic version of Learning Forward Standard Assessment Inventory (SAI) and demographic questions.

An examination of the following questions guided the study:
1. To what extent are the perceptions of the Association of Illinois Middle-level Schools’ teacher members aligned with Learning Forward professional development standards?

2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the professional development alignment in the perception of AIMS teacher members?

3. Are there significant differences in perceptions of middle school teachers’ professional development in the frameworks of context, process, and content standards?

4. Are there significant differences in perceptions of middle school teachers between length of service, and subject taught and the Learning Forward standards of professional development?

**Research Discussions**

The study analyzed quantitative data gathered from an electronic survey developed by the Learning Forward professional development organization. The Standard Assessment Inventory and demographic questions determined teachers’ perceptions of professional development during the 2010-2011 school year. Chapter Four reviewed the purpose of the study, restated the research questions, and described the sample. The chapter also reported the findings for demographic research questions followed by discussions of the means through descriptive analyses. The study results indicate teachers believe their professional development were aligned or to the Learning Forward professional development standards. Table 10 shows a summary of the research finding.
### Table 10

**Summary of Findings by Research Question**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To what extent are the perceptions of the Association of Illinois Middle-level</td>
<td>On average, teachers believe their PD was either aligned or strongly aligned with the factors included in the Learning Forward PD standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher members regarding the quality of professional development aligned with</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Forward professional development standards?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the strengths and weaknesses of the professional development alignments</td>
<td>On average the “Equity” and “Leadership” standards had the highs means among teacher groups. Contrast with “Family Involvement” and “Evaluation” are the lowest means.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the perception of AIMS teacher members?</td>
<td>Years of service had no effect on the perceptions of teachers on professional development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there significant differences in perceptions of middle school teachers</td>
<td>No significant differences were found in the perceptions of the length of service using ANOVA and descriptive statistics. ANOVA was not conducted for the length of service due to incomplete data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>between length of service, and subject taught and the perception of professional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>development?</td>
<td>As with question three, there were no significant differences in perceptions and the dimensions. However, a very small variance was revealed by the analysis of variance. The “Context” standard had the low means contrast with the “Content” standards that had high means.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there significant differences in perceptions of middle school teachers’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professional development in the dimensions of context, process, and content</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>standards?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Significance of the Study

This study is significant in its aims of better understanding professional development in middle schools though collaboration with external partners, which helped to determine the level of alignment among middle school teachers and Learning Forward standards. The collaboration of outside organizations such as Learning Forward and AIMS will also help other researchers to know that two national organizations had a great willingness to help advance research at the student level. Through the Learning Forward, the survey instrument had proven validity and reliability and the standards provided the dimensions of professional development. The survey questions had been vetted through iterations in working with many school districts across the United States. AIMS provided the population for the survey thus ensuring that only middle schools teachers answered the survey.

This study sought to bridge the research gap missing on middle school research. More research is needed to understanding how to grow teacher support through professional development. This study demonstrated that teachers do want to be heard. Although the timing of this study was not ideal, teachers still took time out to make sure the researcher understood their perceptions.

The final strength of this survey is the researcher’s background as a middle school teacher. With 20 years as teacher and assistant principal, the researcher is aware of the life of middle school teachers, the structure of middle schools, difficulties of providing quality professional development for teachers. This background allows for a deeper understanding of middle school teachers.
Limitations of the Study

The topic of professional development is vast. To study all the components of professional development would not be sensible or even plausible for dissertation. Even narrowing the topic to professional development quality and middle school teachers did not address all possible understanding and interpretations by others. Thus, this study was limited to understanding of professional development for a small but specific group of respondents. The 12 Learning Forward standards for quality professional development serve as the framework to better understand how middle school teachers perceive the quality of professional development.

This study was limited to a small sample of middle level teachers who are members of the Association of Illinois Middle Level Schools (AIMS) during the 2010-2011 school year. Findings and data gathered from conducting the research should not be generalized to all middle school teachers or all members of the Association of Illinois Middle-level Schools. Another limitation to this study was the timing of the study. A more effective timing for the survey could have been the mid-winter when teachers are fully engaged in academic activities. Certain inferential statistics were not conducted due the lack of larger samples.

Implications for Future Research and Policy

Effective professional development is about helping teachers to grow in order to provide quality instruction. But often, effective professional development does not take place. Despite years into school reforms effort to improve student achievements, results do not support the professional development necessary to change on teachers’
perceptions of instructional practices. Zepeda (2008), Dufour (2008) and other researchers have sought to transform professional development into a practice that is attuned to the individual teacher, school, and system’s needs.

Teachers’ direct involvements in professional development experiences are essential for any professional development experience. In the analysis of professional development practices, change is difficult and slow. However, knowing that the respondents of this survey perceive their professional development experiences to be aligned to Learning Forward standards is starting place for discussion of the content, process, and context of future professional development. Based on the low averages for family involvement and leadership standards, teachers need more professional development in these areas.

More research on middle schools teachers are needed to investigate the teachers’ perceptions and student achievement, professional learning community, and family involvement at the middle level. Schools need to provide more professional development research at the teacher level that directly influence classroom practices beyond the workshop models. Future research on supporting novice teachers in developing leadership should help to better understand how effective professional development are designed. Finally, more research is needed to determine professional developments teachers find effective improves their practice and increase students’ success.

As more studies on middle schools are conducted, polices will have to change on how professional development practices are viewed discussions. Teachers’ voice at the table during discussions and their perceptions through many more surveys create policies
to develop professional learning that meets their needs. Time is the essential item that can determine the effectiveness of a professional development experience. According to Learning Forward and the National Middle School Association, teachers need to dedicate at minimum 25% of their professional lives to professional development. The benefits of increased time have been demonstrated in other educational areas. Teacher practices would truly change if some of the implications of this study were implemented.

**Conclusion**

This study highlights the importance understanding teachers’ perceptions, professional development, and middle schools. Further, it is also about understanding how to support teacher growth. Quality professional development must meet standards. This study wanted to determine if middle school teachers who are members of AIMS were engaging in professional development that meets the established Learning Forward Standards. The study was conducted through an online survey provided quantitative data that were analyzed through descriptive statistics and box plots. The results of the survey indicated, on average, there are alignments between the teachers’ perceptions and the standards.

Professional development has changed in the past three decades, 1980 to 2010. Knowledge gained from studies is reaching teachers. More collaboration is needed among all stakeholders, policy makers, administrators, and middle school teachers to meet the real intention of professional development, teacher growth and improved practice that result in increased student success. A sustained professional development
program based on standards has proved effective over the years. Quality professional development experiences provide supports to teachers that impact students for life.
APPENDIX A

NATIONAL STAFF DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL STANDARDS

FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT
Context Standards

Staff development that improves the learning of all students…

• Leadership – Requires skillful school and district leaders who guide and support continuous instructional improvement.

• Learning Communities – Organizes adults into professional learning communities whose goals aligned with that of the school and the district.

• Resources – School or districts provides required resources to support adult learning and collaboration.

Process Standards

Staff development that improves the learning of all students…

• Data-Driven – Uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement

• Research-Based - Prepares educators to apply research to decision making.

• Learning – Applies knowledge about human learning and change

• Design – Uses learning strategies appropriate to the intended goal.

• Evaluation – Use multiple sources of information to guide improvement and demonstrate its impact.

• Collaboration – Provides educators with the knowledge, skill, and time to collaborate.
Content Standards

Staff development that improves the learning of all students…

- Equity – Prepares educators to understand and appreciate all students, create safe, orderly and supportive learning environments, and hold high expectations for their academic achievement.

- Quality Teaching – Deepens educators’ content knowledge, provides them with research-base instructional strategies to assist students in meeting rigorous academic standards, and prepares them to use various types of classroom assessments.

- Family and Community Involvement – Provides educators with the knowledge and skills to involve families and other stakeholder appropriately.
APPENDIX B

LETTERS TO COOPERATING INSTITUTION
February 21, 2010

Dear Deb Schrock:

Thank you for agreeing to help recruit members of the Association of Illinois Middle-level Schools (AIMS) as participants for my study at Loyola University Chicago in the School of Education, in the program of Cultural and Educational Policy Studies. My dissertation involves conducting a study on the perceptions of middle schools teachers to understanding if the quality of professional development is consistent with National Staff Development Council’s Standards for Staff Development. This study is under the direction of Dr. Beverly Kasper.

I am asking that allow me to survey the teacher members of AIMS organization. I will email the survey link to you to forward to members you select for their input in my study. I agree to answer any questions your members may have regarding the survey and the study.

Please be assured this research will be carried out following strict ethical principles, participating in this study is voluntary, and consent can be withdrawn at any time.

Please provide me with a letter of cooperation bearing a recent date on an organizational letterhead as evidence of your organization’s involvement in this study.

I know your time is valuable and I appreciate your assistance with this research. If you any questions or would like a copy of the result of the study, please feel free to contact my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Beverly Kasper or me at the sources listed below.

Again, I thank you for helping me with project and your cooperation is appreciated.

Sincerely,

Researher:  
Safurat Anike Giwa  
Assistant Principal  
712 Hinman  
Evanston, IL 60202  
(847) 864-8980  
E-mail: sgiwa@luc.edu

Dissertation Director:  
Beverly Kasper, Ph.D.  
Associate Dean of Education  
Loyola University Chicago  
School of Education  
(312) 915-6464  
Bkasper@luc.edu
April 5, 2011

Sue Francis, Consultants Services Coordinator
Learning Forward
2112 Westridge Drive
Piano, TX 75075-3860

RE: Safurat Giwa, Doctoral Candidate

Dear Ms Francis,

I am the Chair of Ms. Safurat Giwa’s dissertation committee and am writing to confirm that Ms. Safurat Giwa, doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Loyola University Chicago intends to use the SAI Instrument provided by NSDC in its original form, without any modifications whatsoever, as the research tool for her dissertation. Ms. Giwa successfully defended her dissertation proposal and is in the process of securing IRB approval prior to disseminating the SAI instrument to gather data for her dissertation.

Ms. Giwa’s dissertation committee is fully aware of, and approved the use of NSDC’s SAI as the research tool for data collection of Ms. Giwa’s dissertation.

If I can be of further assistance, please don’t hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Beverly B. Kasper, Ed.D.
Dissertation Chair
APPENDIX C

LETTERS FROM COOPERATING INSTITUTION
Safurat Anike Giwa  
Evergreen Academy  
3537 South Paulina  
Chicago, IL 60609

Dear Safurat;

I will send your online survey to a selected group of 30 Illinois educators. This group of educators will be chosen from the Illinois Middle Grades network of schools.

It is my understanding you will email the survey link to me to forward to the 30 educators. You have agreed to answer any questions these network members may have regarding the survey and the study.

I have been assured by you this research will be carried out following strict ethical principles, participation in this study is voluntary, and consent can be withdrawn at any time.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Debra J. Schrock  
AIMS Executive Director  
dschrock@ilstu.edu
CUSTOM-DESIGNED SERVICES ORGANIZATION CONTRACT

ORGANIZATION: Safurat A. Giwa

ADDRESS: 712 Hinman, Evanston, IL 60202

CONTACT PERSON: Safurat A. Giwa
E-MAIL: sagiwa@cps.k12.il.us

WORK NUMBER: 847-864-8980; 312-399-1125 – C
FAX NUMBER: 773-535-5348

DATE(S) OF SERVICE: 2011
PARTICIPANTS: 1 School

CONTRACTED SERVICE: Standards Assessment Inventory

CONTACT: Sue Francis

ADDRESS: 504 S. Locust Street, Oxford, OH 45056

WORK NUMBER: 972-943-0381-Sue
FAX NUMBER: 928-396-1021

E-MAIL: sue.francis@ilearningforward.org

HONORARIUM: $175

Please complete contract and return within seven days to Sue Francis.
(Fax: 928-396-1021 or Mail: 212 Westridge Drive, Plano, TX 75075)

Organization Representative: ___________________________ Date: ____________
Executive Director: ___________________________ Date: ____________

Budget Code: 2-507-40
APPENDIX D

INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS
Dear Middle School Teacher:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the Middle School Perception Survey.

My name is Safurat A. Giwa and I am a doctoral student at Loyola University Chicago in the program of Cultural and Educational Policy Studies and an assistant principal at Evergreen Academy Middle School in Chicago. My dissertation involves conducting a study on the perceptions of middle schools teachers to understand the quality of their professional development. This study is under the direction of Dr. Beverly Kasper.

You are receiving this email because you are a middle school teacher. This study is on learning more about your professional development experience and if they are aligned with the National Staff Development Council’s Standards for Staff Development.

Current professional development research states teachers engage in high quality professional learning are more effective in the classroom. With your help, this survey will provide useful information to determine if middle level teachers experiences high quality professional development and help provide data to schools and districts to foster high quality teacher learning.

Participation in this research is voluntary. There is no penalty for non-participation and you may withdrawal your participation at anytime. Completion of the survey items implies consent as required by the Institutional Review Board at Loyola University to ensure proper permission was given. All information gathered will be used solely for the purpose of this dissertation research.

Your response is important and will be of great value to understanding professional development experiences.

If you have any further questions or would like a copy of the result of the study, please contact Dr. Kasper or me at the sources listed below.

Thank you in advance for your assistance and cooperation.

Sincerely,

Researcher:            Dissertation Director:
Safurat Anike Giwa    Beverly Kasper, Ph.D.
Assistant Principal  Associate Dean of Education
712 Hinman            Loyola University Chicago
Evanston, IL 60202    School of Education
(847) 864-8980        (312) 915-6464
E-mail: sgiwa@luc.edu  BKasper@luc.edu
Middle School Professional Development Perception Survey

Adapted from the NSDC Standard Assessment Survey

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey. The researcher will use this survey to help further the understanding of professional development experiences.

Please indicate your school type.

______ Urban  ________ Suburban  ________ Rural

Please indicate the size of your school base on the number of students

______ 0 to 250  ________ 251 to 500  ________ 501 to 750

______ 751 to 1000  ________ 1001 to 1250  ________ 1251+

Please indicate your gender.

______ Male  ________ Female

Please indicate your ethnicity.

______ African American  ________ Asian/Pacific Islander  ________ Caribbean/West Indian

______ European American  ________ Hispanic American  ________ Middle Eastern

______ Multi-ethnic  ________ Native American  ________ Other

Please indicate your years of experience teaching. (This question will be a drop tab or space for teachers to write in.)

______ 1-5 years  ________ 6-10 years  ________ 11-15 years

______ 16-20 years  ________ 21-25 years  ________ 26-30 years

______ 30+ years

Please indicate your years of experience at this school.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>_____</td>
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<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>_____</td>
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<td>11-15</td>
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<td>16-20</td>
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<td>21-25</td>
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<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
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<tr>
<td>30+</td>
<td>_____</td>
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</table>

Please continue and complete the following survey.
Please indicate the responses that most accurately reflect your professional development experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Always</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Our principal believes teacher learning is essential for our school goal.</td>
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<td>2. We are supported by administration in implementing new instructional practices.</td>
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<td>3. We design evaluations of our professional development activities prior to the professional development program or set of activities.</td>
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<td>4. Our school uses educational research to select programs.</td>
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<td>5. We have opportunities to practice new skills gained during staff development.</td>
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<td>6. Our faculty learns about effective ways to work together.</td>
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<td>7. Teachers engage in content focused professional development.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Our school learns about effective ways to involve families in their children’s education.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Teachers in my school meet as a whole staff to discuss ways to improve teaching and learning.</td>
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<td>10. Our principal’s decision on school-wide issues and practices are influenced by faculty input.</td>
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<td>11. Teachers at our school have opportunities to learn to use technology to enhance instruction.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Teachers at our school learn how to use data to assess students’ learning needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. We use several sources to evaluate the effectiveness of our professional development on student learning (e.g. classroom observations, teacher surveys, conversations with principals).</td>
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<td>14. We make decisions about professional development based on research that shows evidence of improved student performance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. At our school, teacher learning is supported through a combination of strategies (e.g. workshops, peer coaching, study groups, and examination of student work.).</td>
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<td>16. We receive continued support for new initiatives implemented to improve student learning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. The professional development I receive models the instructional strategies that I will utilize in my class.</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. Our principal is committed to providing teachers with opportunities to improve instruction.</td>
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<td>19. Substitutes or colleagues are available to cover our classes when we observe each other’s class or engage in other professional development opportunities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. We discuss what we have learned from our professional development during our professional learning time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>21. When deciding which school improvement efforts to adopt, we look at evidence of effectiveness of programs in other schools.</td>
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<tr>
<td>22. We design improvement strategies based on clearly stated outcomes for teacher and student learning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>23. My school structures time during the school</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
day for teachers to work together to enhance student learning.

24. At our school, we differentiate instruction and assessment based on the needs of our students.

25. We use research-based instructional strategies.

26. Student data are used to determine the effectiveness of our professional development.

27. Our professional development provides in-depth understanding of content related material.

28. Our staff works together to accomplish our teaching and learning goals.

29. We observe each other’s classroom as one way to improve strategies.

30. At our school, previous professional development activities are assessed to determine future opportunities.

31. Communicating our school mission and goals to families and community members is priority.

32. Beginning teachers have mentors to work with at our school.

33. Teachers show respect for all student sub population in our school (e.g. minority, free, and reduce lunch).

34. We receive feedback from our colleagues about classroom practices.

35. In our school, human and material resources are utilized efficiently to improve student learning.

36. When considering school programs, we research whether the program has resulted in student achievement gains.

37. Teachers at our school expect high academic achievement for all our resources.
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>Teacher professional development is part of our school improvement plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>Teachers use student data to plan professional development programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>School leaders work with community members to help students achieve academic goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>The school improvement programs we adopted have been effective with student population similar to ours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42.</td>
<td>At my school, teachers learn through a variety of methods (e.g., discussion, dialogue, and writing).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td>Leadership responsibilities are shared to meet the goals of the school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>We focused on creating positive relationships between students and teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td>Our principal fosters a school culture that is focused on instructional improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46.</td>
<td>Teachers use student data when discussing instruction and curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td>Our principal builds relationships with students’ families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td>School goals determine how resources are allocated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td>Teachers analyze student work with each other to improve student learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51.</td>
<td>We use student classroom performance to assess the success of teacher professional development experiences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
52. Teachers’ prior knowledge and experiences are taken into consideration when designing staff development at our school.

53. At our school, teachers can choose the types of professional development they receive (e.g., study groups, action research, observations).

54. Our school’s professional development helps me learn about effective student assessment techniques.

55. Teachers work with families to help them support students’ learning at home.

56. Teachers examine student work with each other.

57. When we adopt school improvement initiatives we stay with long enough to see if changes in instructional practice and student performance occur.

58. Our principal models effective collaboration.

59. Teachers receive training on curriculum and instruction for students at different levels of learning.

60. Our administrators engage teachers in conversation about instruction and student learning.
REFERENCES


Joyce, B., & Showers, B. (1983). *Power in staff development through research in training*. Alexandra, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development


Middle Schools - The emergence of middle schools, growth and maturation of the middle school movement. Retrieved from: http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2229/MiddleSchools.html#ixzz0u9wuar2B


VITA

Safurat Anike Giwa was born in Accra, Ghana on April 5, 1968. She immigrated to the United States on December 31, 1978. She currently resides in Evanston, IL with her husband and three children.

A product of Chicago Public Schools, Safurat Anike Giwa graduated from King High School in 1987. After one year at Loyola University Chicago, Giwa joined the United States Army Reserves and was honorably discharged in 1994. Giwa returned to Loyola University Chicago to complete her Bachelor of Science in Education in 1992. In 2001, Giwa completed her Master of Science in Education from DePaul University Chicago and her Type 75 School Administrative Certificate at Loyola University in 2003.

Safurat Anike Giwa has worked in education for Chicago Public Schools for the past 20 years. She began her career at Betsy Ross Elementary School in Englewood teaching fourth through eighth grade students. After nine years, Giwa transferred to Evergreen Academy Middle School to teach seventh and eighth graders then becoming the Literacy Coordinator and finally the Assistant Principal.

Safurat Anike Giwa is an active member of the Evergreen Academy community, serving on numerous committees and participating in CPS and Evergreen Academy programs and activities. She is part of numerous grants helping students and teachers to achieve at their highest levels.
The Dissertation submitted by Safurat Giwa has been read and approved by the following committee:

Beverly Kasper, Ph.D., Director
Associate Dean, School of Education
Loyola University Chicago

Theresa Pigott, Ph.D.
Professor, School of Education
Loyola University Chicago

David Bell, Ed.D.
Associate Professor
St. Xavier University