


12-2017

# Teachers' Perceptions on Professional Learning: A Mixed Method Program Evaluation in a Middle School Setting

Emily Crement

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/diss>

 Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Other Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Crement, Emily, "Teachers' Perceptions on Professional Learning: A Mixed Method Program Evaluation in a Middle School Setting" (2017). *Dissertations*. 284.

<https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/diss/284>

Teachers' Perceptions on Professional Learning: A Mixed Method Program Evaluation in  
a Middle School Setting  
Emily T. Lane Crement  
National Louis University

Copyright 2015, Emily T. Crement

This document is copyrighted material. Under copyright law, no parts of this document  
may be reproduced without the expressed permission of the author.

## Document Origination Statement Digital Commons @ NLU

---

This document was created as *one* part of the three-part dissertation requirement of the National Louis University (NLU) Educational Leadership (EDL) Doctoral Program. The National Louis Educational Leadership EdD is a professional practice degree program (Shulman et al., 2006). For the dissertation requirement, doctoral candidates are required to plan, research, and implement three major projects, one each year, within their school or district with a focus on professional practice. The three projects are:

- Program Evaluation
- Change Leadership Plan
- Policy Advocacy Document

For the **Program Evaluation** candidates are required to identify and evaluate a program or practice within their school or district. The “program” can be a current initiative; a grant project; a common practice; or a movement. Focused on utilization, the evaluation can be formative, summative, or developmental (Patton, 2008). The candidate must demonstrate how the evaluation directly relates to student learning.

In the **Change Leadership Plan** candidates develop a plan that considers organizational possibilities for renewal. The plan for organizational change may be at the building or district level. It must be related to an area in need of improvement, and have a clear target in mind. The candidate must be able to identify noticeable and feasible differences that should exist as a result of the change plan (Wagner et al., 2006).

In the **Policy Advocacy Document** candidates develop and advocate for a policy at the local, state or national level using reflective practice and research as a means for supporting and promoting reforms in education. Policy advocacy dissertations use critical theory to address moral and ethical issues of policy formation and administrative decision making (i.e., what ought to be). The purpose is to develop reflective, humane and social critics, moral leaders, and competent professionals, guided by a critical practical rational model (Browder, 1995).

### Works Cited

Browder, L.H. (1995). An alternative to the doctoral dissertation: The policy advocacy concept and the policy document. *Journal of School Leadership*, 5, 40-69.

Patton, M. Q. (2008). *Utilization-focused evaluation* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Shulman, L.S., Golde, C.M., Bueschel, A.C., & Garabedian, K.J. (2006). Reclaiming education’s doctorates: A critique and a proposal. *Educational Researcher*, 35(3), 25-32.

Wagner, T., et al. (2006). *Change leadership: A practical guide to transforming our schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

11.19.16

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the program of teacher professional learning at Hamlin Middle School to guide formative improvement, therefore maximizing the potential of increasing teacher effectiveness and results. By facilitating evaluative thinking among teachers on the topic of teacher professional learning, the goal was to change how teachers *conceptualize* teacher professional learning. The discussion of professional learning was based on the Modes of Learning Framework (HarvardX, 2014), which organizes learning along two continua: hierarchical-distributed and individual-collective. Methodology included a survey on teachers' perceptions of the modes of learning, and focus group discussions in which participants interpreted survey data. Findings suggested that teachers perceive the purpose of professional learning to be hierarchical in nature, and view decisions about professional learning to be primarily the responsibility of the district. There was also a perceived lack of personal responsibility for joining networks for professional learning. Data revealed teachers' perceptions about effective forms of hierarchical learning, as well as negative reactions to district-led professional learning. Finally, teachers showed preferences for collective learning structures. The paper concludes with the recommendations on how to accomplish the following: (a) build trust; (b) provide follow-up; (c) value individual-distributed modes of professional learning; and (d) invest in collective learning experiences.

## PREFACE

In January of 2015, I began my doctoral studies in Educational Leadership at National-Louis University. At that time, I was an Instructional Specialist at Hamlin Middle School (pseudonym). My job responsibilities included supporting the professional development of teachers in English Language Arts and Social Studies. Prior to my doctoral studies, my district had transitioned to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Mathematics. The transition involved teachers writing new curricula, aligning resources, and attempting to shift instructional practices to match the new standards.

From my perspective as an Instructional Specialist, I observed many teachers meeting these tasks with frustration, confusion, anxiety, and resentment. In my opinion, teachers were being asked to do something they did not know how to do. There was a lack of adequate professional development to prepare them for the tasks they were being held accountable for completing.

On the other hand, I observed the teachers who took personal responsibility for their own learning and showed initiative in securing ways to develop professionally weathered the storm much better. I was amazed at how little effort some teachers put into their own learning, and strongly believed teachers, as promoters of learning, needed to do a better job of promoting their own learning. I clearly remember a colleague of mine, saying, “We have been asking for years for professional development on teaching reading in the content areas, but we have never gotten it.” My unspoken response was, “Do you mean for years you have not known how to do your job and did nothing about it?”

My whole life, I have been someone who has taken initiative for my own learning. In the summer prior to beginning the doctoral program, I enrolled in an online course through a Harvard extension called Leaders of Learning. This Massive Online Open Course, or MOOC, was taught by leading educational theorist, Richard Elmore. This class introduced me to the Modes of Learning Framework, which organized learning across two continua. According to Dr. Elmore, learning tends to be either hierarchically driven, when content is packaged in a pre-defined sequence and disseminated from an expert to a novice, or distributed, where the learner takes responsibility for organizing learning. Learning also occurs individually or collectively. When arranged in a matrix, these continua form four “modes” of learning: Hierarchical-Individual, Hierarchical-Collective, Distributed-Individual, and Distributed-Collective. In reality, the modes do not function in isolation of one another, however learners show preferences for different modes of learning for different purposes.

I began to think about how the Modes of Learning might be adapted to describe Modes of *Professional Learning*. I thought about who is responsible for designing professional learning experiences. How much responsibility rests with the school district, and how much should teachers be expected to pursue on their own? I thought about whether or not teachers learn better in groups, or working independently.

In the first year of my three-part dissertation, I used the Modes of Learning Framework to understand teachers’ perceptions on these questions. I concluded there is a need for mode of professional learning within a comprehensive professional development program. In the second year, I researched change efforts necessary to ensure that each mode of professional learning contributed to the school functioning as a learning system

which promotes continuous improvement. I came to understand that change is a complex process that requires thoughtful responses across a variety of contexts. In my final year, I advocated for a policy to implement Standards for Professional Learning. I believe that by having a shared understanding of what constitutes high-quality professional learning, schools and districts will make more progress towards improving learning for students.

I began this doctoral journey as a teacher. In my final semester the program, I became a middle school principal. Being in a position of legitimate authority means I have a lot of responsibility in helping teachers grow professionally, supporting both hierarchical and distributed modes of learning, as well as encouraging teachers to learn individually and collectively. I am extremely grateful that I had the opportunity to read, write, and think deeply on this responsibility during my three years of dissertation work.



For Calvin.

May my love for you give me direction. The teachers I would want for you are the teachers all children deserve.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This program evaluation would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of my colleagues, teachers, and family. Throughout this process, I have benefited greatly from the feedback of Dr. Linell Monson-Laswell and Dr. Beth Minor. I am extremely grateful for the support of my husband, Greg Lane, who thinks I'm an "apple." And to my parents, Joyce and Tony Crement—for believing in me always.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

ABSTRACT ..... iv

PREFACE ..... v

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ..... ix

LIST OF TABLES ..... xii

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION ..... 1

    Purpose ..... 1

    Rationale..... 3

    Goals..... 4

    Research Questions ..... 5

SECTION TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW ..... 6

    Introduction ..... 6

    Professional Learning in the 21st Century ..... 7

    Modes of Learning Framework..... 12

        Hierarchical-Distributed Continuum ..... 13

        Individual-Collective Continuum ..... 19

    Professional Learning and Teacher Self-Efficacy..... 23

SECTION THREE: METHODOLOGY..... 26

    Research Design Overview ..... 26

    Participants ..... 26

    Data Gathering Techniques..... 30

        Modes of Teacher Professional Learning Assessment ..... 30

        Focus Groups ..... 31

    Data Analysis Techniques..... 32

        Modes of Teacher Professional Learning Assessment ..... 32

        Focus Groups..... 33

SECTION FOUR: FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION..... 34

    Introduction ..... 34

    Teachers’ Perceptions on the Hierarchical Nature of Professional Learning ..... 35

        Responsibility for Decisions..... 35

        Conditions for Effective Hierarchical Professional Learning ..... 38

        Conditions for Ineffective Hierarchical Professional Learning..... 43

    Teachers’ Perceptions on Distributed Responsibility in Professional Learning..... 44

    Teachers’ Perceptions on Collective Learning Experiences ..... 45

Conclusion.....	48
SECTION FIVE: JUDGMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	50
Introduction .....	50
“I Need to Trust My District” .....	50
Recommendation 1: School and District Leaders Should Make Conscious and Concerted Efforts to Build Trust. ....	51
“That Day, ‘This Is What You Got, And That’s It’”.....	53
Recommendation 2: Provide Follow-Up to Training to the Greatest Extent Possible. .....	53
“I’ve Never Been Asked, ‘What Journals Are You Reading?’” .....	55
Recommendation 3: Value Individual Distributed Forms of Learning. ....	56
“Two People Can’t Change a School” .....	58
Recommendation 4: Invest in Collective Learning Experiences to Maximize the Potential for Large-Scale Change.....	59
Conclusion.....	59
REFERENCES .....	61
APPENDIX A: MODES OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSESSMENT .....	65
APPENDIX B: RESULTS OF MODES OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSESSMENT .....	69
APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS .....	72
APPENDIX D: SAMPLE PERSONAL REPORT .....	76

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Quadrants of Modes of Learning Framework.....	12
Table 2. Joyce and Calhoun’s Effect Size of Training .....	15
Table 3. Comparison of Professional Learning Communities and Performance Training Sects...	22
Table 4. Years of Completed Teaching Experience of Survey Respondents.....	27
Table 5. Content Area Assignments of Survey Respondents .....	28
Table 6. Years of Teaching Experience of Focus Group Participants .....	28
Table 7. Content Area Assignments of Focus Group Participants.....	29
Table 8. Teacher Perception on Responsibility for Professional Learning.....	36
Table 9. Teachers’ Perceptions on How Professional Learning Occurs .....	47

## SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Purpose

The product that we as teachers promote is a meaningfully constructed work experience, the profit of which is learning (Schlechty, 1990). At our best, we believe that these experiences have the power to enlighten, to transform, and to empower. We believe that these experiences allow individuals to become fuller, more complete versions of themselves. Does it not stand to reason that we as teachers should regularly encounter the type of work experiences we strive to promote? Should learning not be the profit of these experiences, as well? Yet, as a teacher and instructional specialist, I question whether we always approach professional learning as an opportunity for growth.

Professional development in the district is an umbrella term to describe the opportunities and activities within the district that support teacher learning and build capacity. However, the terms *professional development*, *staff development*, and *training* carry with them a connotation of being planned and implemented top-down from district or school leadership. In the context of this research, I will use the term *teacher professional learning* to describe learning experiences that include not only school or district-led development, but also those that are initiated by individual or collective groups of teachers for their own growth and development.

Teacher professional learning in the district includes a variety of activities and opportunities. Formal trainings and presentations are frequently offered during District Institute Days and School Improvement Days. As per the teaching contract, teachers remain on campus each Wednesday for an additional hour and fifteen minutes of professional development time. The schedule for Wednesdays includes staff meetings,

Response to Intervention meetings, content area meetings, and technology training. At the middle school level, teachers also have one 42- minute period per day that is common with other grade level-teachers. Two days a week, this time is dedicated to what is called *common plan time* or *content team meetings*, during which teachers work collaboratively to plan lessons and discuss student work. During the 2015–2016 school year, one 42- minute period a week is devoted to professional learning.

Teacher professional learning in the district occurs across a range of contexts, from individual to collective. Some learning experiences, including reading professional books and journals, viewing webinars, and attending conferences, occur with the individual teacher as the primary focus of learning. Other learning experiences, such as common professional planning time, focus primarily on a collective group of teachers. Teacher professional learning also varies in how the content is structured. Sometimes, it is given in a predetermined sequence, and sometimes teachers pursue their own learning interests and needs. Each of these contexts for learning is described by Richard Elmore (HarvardX, 2014) in his Modes of Learning Framework. Further discussion of the framework will be addressed in the review of the literature.

The purpose of this evaluation is not to reach a definitive conclusion about whether teacher professional learning at Hamlin Middle School is effective. However, the purpose is to learn more about the teacher professional learning within the school to guide formative improvement, which could in turn maximize the potential for increasing teacher effectiveness and results for students (Learning Forward, 2015).

Another purpose of this evaluation is to involve teachers in the process of the evaluation itself. According to Michael Patton (2008), “the process of engaging in

evaluation can have as much or more impact than the findings generated” (p.175). It was my intention to facilitate evaluative thinking among teachers on the topic of teacher professional learning, resulting in a change in how they conceptualize it. By helping teachers align their experiences with their beliefs, I hoped to increase teacher engagement in professional learning and foster a sense of ownership and self-determination about what and how they learn (Patton, 2008).

### **Rationale**

Teacher professional learning is important to evaluate for several reasons. First, the educational paradigm is shifting. Thought leaders in education are recognizing that the traditional model of schooling, designed during the Industrial Revolution and driven by economic imperatives of the era, is no longer best suited for a 21st-century economy (Robinson, 2010). In his interviews with corporate leaders, Tony Wagner (2008) has identified seven survival skills necessary for competing in a global economy. These skills are a departure from traditional content-driven curricula, and emphasize abilities such as critical thinking, initiative, adaptability, and accessing and analyzing information. In order for the paradigm to shift, teachers have to do things differently. As stated by Saavedra and Opfer (2012), “21st century learning requires 21st century teaching.” In order for students to acquire the skills they need to participate in the changing economy, teachers first need to be proficient in those skills. Therefore, I would add an extension to Saavedra and Opfer’s thesis: 21st-century teaching requires 21st-century *teacher learning*. By valuing different modes of teacher professional learning, teachers would have the opportunity to participate as 21st-century learners.



A second rationale for studying teacher professional learning is that promoting different modes of learning would provide a sense of autonomy in teachers' professional development. I would argue that this autonomy would lead to increased motivation and job satisfaction among teachers, which would translate into more effective and engaged teaching practices.

Third, promoting different modes of teacher professional learning would build diverse capacities among teachers in ways that over-reliance on the district-led training mode fails to do. It would reduce the burden on the district to provide formalized training on every needed skill set by incentivizing participation in self- and group-directed learning. Gone are the days when teachers can sit back and be assured that all of the knowledge and skills needed to be successful leaders of learning will be provided to them by the district office in neatly packaged increments of "professional development" credits. Professional learning must occur across a range of contexts, from individual to collective, and from district-structured to teacher-initiated.

### **Goals**

The first goal of this evaluation is help stakeholders, including teachers and district leaders, reconceptualize the boundaries of the current professional development program to be more aligned with teachers' attitudes and beliefs about professional learning. As a result of participating in the research, teachers will take better advantage of distributed structures of learning and be less reliant on the district to provide all professional learning experience in the form of trainings. Teachers will begin to view opportunities such as common plan time as holding greater potential for professional growth and learning. School and district leaders will also put systems in place that

support teacher learning that is aligned with teachers' attitudes and beliefs. By helping teachers become more engaged in their own professional learning, learning will be more effective and will result in positive outcomes for students.

Another goal of this research is to impact the educational community at large by encouraging discussion about what actually works for teachers, and shifting the paradigm of professional learning to an improved 21st-century approach.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research question of my study is: What are teachers' perceptions about professional learning? For the scope of this study, teacher attitudes and beliefs about learning will be defined by an adapted version of the Modes of Learning Assessment (HarvardX, 2014). Related to this question, I will also address the following research questions:

- What action steps can teachers take to better align professional learning with their beliefs and attitudes?
- What systems can school and district leadership put in place to better support teachers in professional learning?

In the next section, I will review the literature on teacher professional learning as it relates to the themes in the Modes of Learning Framework (HarvardX, 2014) as a basis for interpreting teachers' perceptions, and providing judgments and recommendations aligned to the above research questions.

## SECTION TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

This program evaluation studies teachers' perceptions of professional learning as viewed through the lens of the Modes of Learning Framework (HarvardX, 2014). Research shows that improving learning opportunities for students will enhance teacher performance and lead to improved outcomes for students (Parise & Spillane, 2010).

In this section, I will review the literature relating to teacher professional learning. First, I will examine teacher professional learning in relation to the needs of 21st-century schooling. Second, I will discuss the contexts for teacher professional learning using the Modes of Learning Framework (HarvardX, 2014) as a model. Within that framework, I will address the questions of "How is the content and format of professional learning determined, and by whom?" as well as "When should professional learning be focused on the individual teacher, and when should it focus on teachers as a collective group?" Finally, I will discuss how more engaging professional learning experiences for teachers will lead to teacher self-efficacy, which supports better outcomes for students.

Much of the research on teacher professional learning has been descriptive in nature (Parise & Spillane, 2010), and based more on experience than on empirical research (Schlechty, 1990). In fact, in their paper entitled *Reviewing the Evidence on How Teacher Professional Development Affects Student Achievement*, Guskey and Yoon (2009) reviewed 1,343 studies and found that only nine met the standards of credible evidence set by the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse.

In his writings on school improvement, Schlechty (1997) described *procedural change*, which addresses the way a job is done, *technical change*, which addresses the

means by which schools do the job, and *structural and cultural change*, which “consists of changing the nature of the work itself, reorienting its purpose, and refocusing its intent” (p. 205). Schlechty stated that cultural and structural changes are less accessible to study and analysis. It is my view that improvements to teacher professional learning will involve cultural and structural changes, and thus the literature reviewed for this section includes more descriptive analysis from leaders in the field of teacher professional learning and less empirical research.

### **Professional Learning in the 21st Century**

The Common Core Standards, which were adopted in Illinois in 2010 and implemented in schools during the 2013–2014 school year, define the knowledge and skills a student should acquire by the end of each grade so that, upon completion of 12th grade, each child will be prepared to enter careers, college, or workforce training. While the current rhetoric in education communicates high standards for all students, and the potential to have all students participate in a global economy (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015), the reality is the culture and structure of American schooling has not fundamentally changed since the Industrial Revolution (Elmore, 2002). During the late 19th and early 20th century, the education system was designed to sort people (men, mostly) into two career paths: managerial and labor (Schlechty, 1990). Women and minorities were largely exempt from the sorting process. The idea that all children should graduate high school—let alone be college-ready upon graduation—would have been as preposterous as it would have been impractical.

With our current educational institutions so ill-prepared to deal with the challenges of the 21st century, it is of little wonder that many people regard American

public schools to be failing. However, Phillip Schlechty (1997) cautioned that viewing the education system as a failure is not the most appropriate view. In his words, “American public schools are better at doing what they were designed to do than ever in the past. Unfortunately, what the schools were designed to do is no longer serving the needs of American society” (p. 11).

In a system that seems to need less of a reform than a fundamental redesign, the need for improved opportunities for teacher professional development is more apparent than ever. It would be impossible for such an overhaul to take place without also rethinking models of teacher professional learning. Unfortunately, many of the current “sit and get” practices in professional development offer little hope for the prospect of supporting teachers to meet the challenges of 21st-century learning. Judith Little (1993) stated the following:

Much ‘staff development’ or ‘inservice’ communicates a relatively impoverished view of teachers, teaching, and teacher development. Compared to the complexity, subtlety, and uncertainties of the classroom, professional development is often a remarkably low-intensity enterprise. It requires little in the way of intellectual struggle or emotional engagement, and takes only superficial account of teachers’ histories or circumstances. Compared to the complexity and ambiguity of the most ambitious reforms, professional development is often substantively weak and politically marginal. (p. 22)

The teaching profession is more complex now than it has ever been. As teachers learn to address the challenges that they have never faced before, they need new methods of support (Hargreaves, 2003). Therefore, the reconceptualization of teacher professional

learning requires an understanding of the types of challenges that 21st-century teachers face.

Eleanor Drago-Severson (2003) wrote about the differences between technical problems, in which both the problem and the solution are both clearly defined, and adaptive challenges, in which neither the problem nor the solution is known or has been identified. Technical challenges can be approached with traditional training models of professional development, where knowledge and skills are passed from an expert to a novice. Adaptive challenges require a different approach.

Educators will have to address these [adaptive] challenges while in the process of working on them. Thus, ongoing support for adult growth and new ways of working, learning, growing, and leading together—not just specific training or discrete skill acquisition—is critical to fulfilling our visions for our school communities. (Drago-Severson, 2009, p. 7)

The types of experiences teachers need in terms of professional learning should mirror the experiences students need to meet the demands of the 21st century (Sparks, 2004). Borko (2004) stated that “we cannot expect teachers to create a community of learners if they do not have a parallel community to nourish their own growth” (p. 7). One such example of a parallel experience was implemented in the 1990s by the Philadelphia Alliance for Teacher Humanities in the Schools (PATHS). The PATHS program provided grants to teachers to engage in direct inquiry with collections, curators, and experts in the field of humanities, which allowed teachers to be involved in the *construction* of knowledge, rather than just the *consumption* of it (Little, 1993). This level

of teacher engagement and intellectualism is crucial if we expect to impart these skills to our students.

If the call for improved teacher professional learning opportunities has sounded since the 1990s, one may wonder why we have seen such little progress in the ensuing quarter of a century. Educational leaders and researchers point to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) as an explanation. No Child Left Behind was the nickname given to the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which authorized federal spending on K–12 education. NCLB stipulated that professional development needed to be an integral part of school-wide and district-wide improvement plans (“Federal No Child Left Behind Programs to Help Teachers,” 2005). However, as school districts labored to meet the requirements for professional development in order to maintain federal funding, some districts became more focused on compliance versus effectiveness. As Colbert, Brown, Choi, and Thomas (2008) explained:

Prior to the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation (Public Law 107-110), the field was slowly moving away from the ‘sit and get’ model, which imposes professional development on teachers in a top-down, non-collaborative manner. However, with the implementation of NCLB the field has seen a resurgence of professional development dependent on mandates, scripted teaching, and oversight by school administrators to assure compliance. (p. 136)

Unfortunately, the shift to compliance-based professional development occurred more dramatically in high-poverty districts where there was a greater dependence on federal funding. More affluent districts were able to continue what Sparks (2004) categorized as “tier one” professional learning that was more intellectually engaging and

required greater teacher involvement in cycles of action and reflection. Less affluent districts were relegated to “tier two” professional learning, which focused on mandates and compliance.

The disparate nature of professional learning between schools began to snowball into greater disparity. According to Hargreaves (2003), the most qualified teachers are attracted to the most favorable environments for professional learning, and so the cycle continued. To describe this effect, Hargreaves coined the term “professional development apartheid” (p. 190), a bleak descriptor to be sure.

As schooling and learning change in the 21st century, teacher professional learning must change as well. This presents what Sykes (1999) called a “familiar chicken-and-egg problem” (p. 159). Which comes first: a change to the structure of schooling, or a change to teacher professional learning models? Sykes believed that the connection between teacher learning and student learning is so strong, that one cannot be reformed without the other. He further explained the paradox: “If TPD [teacher professional development] is to be successful, it must fit with the regularities in place, but if it fits, it is unlikely to exert much influence on teacher and student learning” (p. 160). In other words, the types of professional learning experiences that would be required to overhaul the current structure of schooling do not fit within the context of the current structure of schooling. Reform efforts should focus on both the teacher and student.

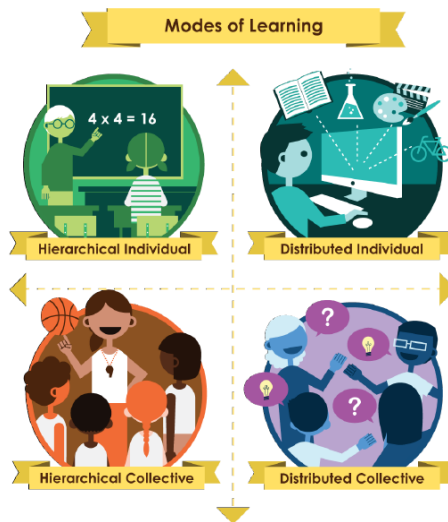
A step toward addressing change in professional learning begins with making implicit ideas about learning more explicit. For this, we can turn to the Modes of Learning Framework (HarvardX, 2014).



## Modes of Learning Framework

The Modes of Learning Framework was developed by Richard Elmore in 2014 as part of a massive open online course (MOOC) through EdX.org. The MOOC, called Leaders of Learning, was a free course spanning six weeks. Participants (myself included) viewed video lectures given by Dr. Elmore and had the opportunity to participate in online discussions. Assignments and activities were submitted electronically for peer review. The purpose of the Modes of Learning Framework was to help course participants organize points of view about learning into four quadrants as a way of developing a personal theory of learning. The horizontal axis of the matrix shows the continuum between hierarchical and distributed modes of learning, while the vertical axis displays the continuum between individual and collective. Table 1 below shows the four quadrants in the Modes of Learning Framework organized across the two continuums.

*Table 1. Quadrants of Modes of Learning Framework (HarvardX, 2014)*



Although the quadrants represent extreme versions of each point of view with inflexible boundaries, in reality most people move fluidly between the quadrants as informed by their own experiences and understandings (HarvardX, 2014).

For the purpose of this literature review, I will focus on the two continuums as they relate to teacher professional development, rather than on the specific individual quadrants.

### **Hierarchical-Distributed Continuum**

The hierarchical-distributed axis answers the questions of how knowledge is organized for learning and who or what is responsible for organizing it. Elmore explains,

When we say hierarchical we mean that knowledge is organized into particular streams of learning, it has a particular sequence, it is organized into blocks of knowledge that are well-defined ... Distributed definitions of learning mean that knowledge has multiple uses to multiple people. The value of learning is determined by its use and the opportunities that people have to access it, and that the learner makes the primary choices about what has value, what's interesting, and what needs to be learned (HarvardX, 2014, "What are the Modes of Learning Axes?").

According to Elmore (2002), determining who decides the purpose and focus of professional development is often a source of conflict in school districts.

Activities on the hierarchical side of the continuum include what we consider to be the training mode of professional learning. In training activities, the knowledge content to be learned is determined by an expert, and the format of the training puts teachers in the role of receivers of expert knowledge. As Bryk, Rollow, and Pinnell

stated, often the experts who determine the knowledge for the training are district office personnel, who identify problems, select programs, and evaluate outcomes (as cited in Hawley & Valli, 1999). Usually, the knowledge content of professional learning is set with the intention of improving demonstrated knowledge among students, and the professional learning experience is evaluated based on its effect on student achievement (Elmore, 2002).

Consider the following analogy from Hargreaves (2003), who related the training mode of professional development to his experience scuba diving:

Five meters underwater, I was relieved to be doing this [diving] in the hands of a very directive (as well as calm and supportive) coach and trainer rather than with someone who wanted to engage me in underwater critical dialogue and reflective practice. Training will always be a necessary component of professional learning (p. 180).

Hargreaves (2003) has outlined four potential benefits that training provides:

1. Well-implemented training allows teachers to experience an early success in demonstrated student achievement gains.
2. Success can be effective in challenging the view that some populations can't learn, which raises the standards for all students.
3. Training in subjects, especially math and literacy, has caused teachers to take those subjects more seriously.
4. Training on scripted materials can provide support for teachers who need it.

Note that not all training models are created equal. Although most training models have positive effects on knowledge transfer from the trainer / expert to the teacher, one-shot training is unlikely to have any effect on short-term or long-term classroom implementation. Joyce and Calhoun (2010) have studied the effects of training on classroom use and have found that demonstrations, lesson planning, and coaching provide a cumulative impact on training to make it more effective. Table 2 details their findings.

*Table 2.* Joyce and Calhoun’s effect size of training

<b>Training Element</b>	<b>Effects on Knowledge</b>	<b>Effects on Short-Term Use</b>	<b>Effects on Long-Term Use</b>
Study of Rationale	Very positive	5–10%	5–10%
Rationale Plus Demonstrations (10 or more)	Very positive	5–20%	5–10%
Rationale Plus Demonstrations Plus Planning of Units and Lessons	Very positive	80–90%	5–10%
All of the Above Plus Peer Coaching	Very positive	90%+	90%+

Hierarchical models of professional learning, while certainly the most appropriate in certain circumstances, are not without critics. One such criticism relates to accountability and test achievement. Because the hierarchy of teacher professional knowledge is defined by demonstrated student knowledge, those who determine

professional development content run the risk of confusing student knowledge with test achievement (Schlechty, 1990; Joyce & Showers, 2002). According to Schlechty (1990), “Learning-focused schools too often become test-focused schools. The results pursued are gains in test scores” (p. 55).

Another criticism of hierarchical, or training, modes of teacher professional learning is that they are likely to promote business-as-usual practices, and are not likely to bring about a change in beliefs, norms, and values required to expand the possibilities about what is possible for students to achieve (Little, 1993; Elmore, 2002).

A third criticism of hierarchical modes is that they create a culture of compliance within the schools, which ultimately does little to change what teachers do behind the closed doors of their own classrooms (Wagner, 2008). In professional learning situations that depend on teacher compliance, teachers are less likely to form their own judgements or shape their own inquiries (Little, 1993). Hargreaves (2003) stated that in hierarchical learning situations that do not take individual context into account, “teachers are put in a position of dependence on and submission to other people’s questionable certainties of effective teaching that claim universal applicability without any adjustment to context” (p.181).

Although there will always be a place for hierarchical models of professional learning, districts are increasingly turning to more distributed ways of determining knowledge content for professional learning. Many experts in the field of teacher professional learning believe that teachers themselves should be actively responsible for determining interests and needs, selecting how to meet those needs, and where to spend

their time and energy (Romanish, 1993; Gregson & Sturko, 2007). Consider the following:

The folk saying, “Thems that does the doin’ does the decidin” speaks to the first Who question: Those who will be implementing changes in their classrooms, schools, and districts as a result of professional learning need to be involved in determining exactly how the professional learning will be constructed. Gone are the days when someone “higher up” decides what teachers should be doing in terms of professional learning. (Delehant & Easton, 2015, p. 33)

The trend toward involving teachers in the decision-making process mirrors trends happening in American business. Leaders in both fields have realized that allowing employees to be active contributors increases productivity and job satisfaction (Schlechty, 1990). It also represents a more democratic way of running a school, which should be an aim of American public schooling in addition to academic achievement (Romanish, 1993). Most important, giving teachers at least mutual decision-making authority for their own learning is strongly supported by theories of adult learning (Gregson & Sturko, 2007; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011).

An example of a distributed model of teacher professional learning was described by Colbert et al. (2008) in their writing on the Francis P. Collea Teacher Achievement Award (CTAAP) Program. The program was originally funded in 1994–1995. Researchers investigated the sixth two-year cycle in the program, which occurred between 2004 and 2006. Teams of teachers across all grade levels and subject areas were invited to submit proposals for a grant of \$30,000, spanning a two-year period. The funds could be used at the teachers’ discretion, for activities including but not limited to “travel

to professional organization conferences and project-related training, enrolling in PD and university courses, bringing in experts, purchasing and evaluating curriculum and software materials” (p. 136). Twelve teams of two to four participating teachers each were awarded grants. One team of two teachers took university coursework in molecular and cellular biology that covered topics such as therapeutic cloning, transgenic manipulation of genes, and adult embryonic stem cells. The teachers reported that by enhancing their content knowledge, they were able to update their lessons to replace outdated textbooks. Teachers were then surveyed about their experiences regarding improvements in subject matter knowledge, instructional practices, and professionalism. The majority of teachers reported a major or moderate impact in all three areas, with 100% of teachers claiming an increase in empowerment, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and professionalism (Colbert et al., 2008).

A model based on the CTAAP, implemented in California and called the Teacher-Based Reform (T-BAR) Program, was reviewed by Sullivan and Westover (2015). The program is funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Improving Teacher Quality Grants Program, and has awarded more than \$9 million to support the professional learning of participating teachers. Like the previous researchers, Sullivan and Westover concluded that the majority of teachers found a strong and lasting value from participating in the program.

Positive effects from distributed models of professional learning should not be overgeneralized to the conclusion that there is no need for any central leadership. In fact, in distributed models of professional learning, there is a strong need for a uniting vision. As Schlechty (1997) stated,

Decentralization does not cause fragmentation and destruction of the central core of the system. Indeed, it only works well when the central core is strong. This core nurtures the beliefs that guide the system and ensures that the direction of the system is established and maintained. (p. 118)

This implies that even in situations in which teachers are granted autonomy in their own professional learning, the district still has a responsibility to develop and promote a common vision.

### **Individual-Collective Continuum**

The second continuum on the Modes of Learning Framework is individual learning versus collective learning. On the one end of the continuum, learning is a wholly individual activity, and engages the single learner in direct learning experiences. The other end of the continuum places emphasis on the social aspects of learning, and acknowledges that relationships and interaction between people aid the learning process (HarvardX, 2014).

As with the hierarchical / distributed continuum, the individual / collective continuum is not an either-or proposition, but rather a “both.” According to Elmore (2002), “Capturing individual learning for the benefit of the group enterprise depends on structures that support interdependence in serious, substantive ways” (p. 17). Borko (2004) likewise advised to take a situated perspective on individual and collective learning, and used the analogy of a multifocal contact lens to illustrate the point. The near-vision perspective focuses on the individual, while the distance-vision perspective focuses on collective learning. Both perspectives coexist, and require the eye to adjust vision to the situation.



Using the former lens to focus professional development on the individual teacher is appropriate in particular contexts. First, focusing on individuals is particularly effective in terms of deepening content knowledge. According to Borko (2004), students will only be able to achieve a level of conceptual understanding that is as rich and flexible as the teachers who teach them. Such understanding includes not only the facts and concepts involved with the discipline, but also the processes for generating new knowledge and verifying the validity of claims. Professional learning experiences that put individual teachers in direct engagement of mathematical problem-solving or scientific experiments are particularly effective (Borko, 2004).

Other types of professional learning experiences with an individual focus that work well are videotaping lessons for subsequent review by the teacher (Wagner, 2008) and analyzing critical incidents through personal reflection and journaling (Murray, 2010; Joyce & Calhoun, 2010).

Schlechty (1990) believed that focusing professional learning on individual teachers leads to innovation. He stated,

Ideas begin with individuals, not with groups. Groups do not think anything. Groups simply create structures for thought and action. Indeed, groupthink is a dangerous commodity if an organization is to be creative and responsive, for groupthink is inherently conservative. What is needed are group structures that encourage individuals to think creatively and group structures that reward individuals for such thought. If an idea starts at the bottom, there must be a means for it to reach the top in a compelling form; if an idea starts at the top, there must be mechanisms for assuring that it flows down the hierarchy in a compelling form

(p.50).

As Schlechty's quote above suggests, an individual's personal learning still needs a strong group structure to turn thoughts into actions; hence, the distance view of collective professional learning must also remain in focus. Elmore (2002) has written, "[Professional development] is a collective good rather than a private or individual good. Its value is judged by what it contributes to the individual's capacity to improve the instruction in the school and school system" (p. 14). Therefore, individuals need to be put in collaborative situations within the school, grade, department, and around areas of common interest (Colbert et al., 2008).

Because collaborative learning environments and individual learning are mutually supportive, many school districts are implementing professional learning communities, or PLCs, to focus on collective learning. According to Hargreaves (2003), effective PLCs should emphasize collaborative work and discussion, a strong focus on teaching and learning, and evaluation of progress and problems using assessments over time.

Yet in some school districts' zest to establish PLCs, Hargreaves (2003) cautioned that some actually establish what he called *performance-training sects*. Table 3 shows Hargreaves's comparisons between true professional learning communities and performance-training sects:

Table 3. Comparison of professional learning communities and performance-training sects

Professional Learning Communities	Performance-Training Sects
transfer knowledge	transfer knowledge
shared inquiry	imposed requirements
evidence informed	results driven
situated certainty	false certainty
local solutions	standardized scripts
joint responsibility	deference to authority
continuous learning	intensive training
communities of practice	sects of performance

In situations in which teachers are not offered truly collaborative environments, but are subject to performance-training sects, teachers succumb to what Hargreaves (2003) called *contrived collegiality* (p. 136). In such environments, Hargreaves believed teachers are less satisfied, less professional, and less motivated to teach, all of which impact their long-term commitment to their work. In a qualitative study of what Hargreaves (1991) deemed to be ineffective implementation of collaborative learning time, he discovered through semi-constructed interviews that many teachers found collective learning time to be inflexible and inefficient, and that teachers were not

meeting when they were scheduled to meet, or meeting when they felt they had nothing to talk about.

### **Professional Learning and Teacher Self-Efficacy**

Creating the ideal conditions for teacher learning across the hierarchical / distributed, and individual / collective continuums could have an empowering effect on teachers and will generate a sense of personal expertness and pride (Joyce & Calhoun, 2010). Well-designed professional learning experiences can also increase self-efficacy, or the teacher's belief that she is capable of performing the actions and activities that would be required to bring about change in student outcomes (Greer & Morrison, 2008). Research has demonstrated that teachers with a high degree of self-efficacy bring a greater level of personal responsibility to their work (Greer & Morrison, 2008; Timperly, 2008; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Elmore, 2002).

Self-efficacy is also linked to greater levels of innovation (Greer & Morrison, 2008). Therefore, it is important to design professional learning experiences that stimulate teacher intellectualism and creativity. Judith Little (1993) stated that "by acknowledging the importance of teachers' intellectual curiosities and capacities, and by crediting teachers' contributions to knowledge and practice, such approaches may strengthen the enthusiasm teachers bring to their work and the intellectual bent they display in the classroom" (p. 16).

While high-quality professional learning experiences for teachers can have positive impacts on teacher self-efficacy, low-quality learning experiences can impact

teachers can have a negative effect. Hawley and Valli (1999) have written that if teachers engage in professional development that does not result in positive outcomes for students, they can become detached from future school improvement efforts. Elmore (2002) warned, “If this [ineffective] professional development cycle is run repeatedly, it produces a negative reinforcement pattern. Teachers become cynical about any new idea when no previous new ideas have worked” (p. 25).

Given that improved student outcomes are linked to higher levels of teacher self-efficacy, and professional development has the potential to influence self-efficacy either positively or negatively, designing professional learning opportunities with the explicit intention of engaging and empowering teachers appears to be a worthy objective in and of itself (Greer & Morrison, 2008; Timperley, 2008).

In conclusion, it is very important to re-examine the way we conduct school in a changing cultural and economic climate. This cannot happen without effective professional learning experiences for in-service teachers. The first step to creating these experiences for teachers is to understand some of the underlying contexts for professional learning. The Modes of Learning Framework makes these contexts explicit. The content of professional learning can be experienced in a hierarchical manner when the knowledge is presented in a predetermined sequence, or it can be distributed if teachers are given responsibility for determining the content that they feel is important. The focus of professional learning can be on individual teachers, or on collective groups of teachers. Each context for learning is appropriate in specific situations; however, it is critical that teachers, and school and district leadership are thoughtful about how professional learning experiences are implemented across contexts. By experiencing high-quality

professional learning, teachers will have an increase in self-efficacy, which will result in improved student learning.

## **SECTION THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design Overview**

My research design seeks to understand and report teachers' beliefs and attitudes about professional learning. I used a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative data. After I gathered quantitative and qualitative data from the adapted Modes of Learning Assessment, I worked with focus groups of teacher participants to discuss the data, gaining further insight into teachers' perceptions of hierarchical, distributed, collective, and individual modes of learning. Transcripts of teachers discussing the data were analyzed qualitatively to look for themes.

This research design was chosen for several reasons. First, the individual survey allowed me to measure individuals' beliefs and attitudes, and to view those data in terms of frequency of response. By conducting focus groups to discuss the data collected on the survey, I was able to determine if a gap exists between the reported attitudes and beliefs of teachers and their shared experiences. In addition, doing so granted me the opportunity to hear diverse perspectives on those experiences and ideas for improvement.

### **Participants**

The key participants from whom I gathered data were teachers at Hamlin Middle School (pseudonym). The pool of participants was chosen because I, the researcher, was an instructional specialist at that school at the time of the study. My connection to the school meant that I had established relationships with the participants, which may have encouraged open and honest participation. Actual participation was determined on a volunteer basis.

Fifty-one teachers and certified staff members signed the informed consent form.

Of that number, 38 teachers and staff members completed the online survey.

Demographic breakdown of the survey participants is presented in Tables 4 and 5.

*Table 4. Years of completed teaching experience of survey respondents*

<b>Years of Completed Teaching Experience</b>	<b>Percent of Total and Number of Responses</b>
0–3 years	7.9% 3 responses
4–8 years	13.2% 5 responses
9–13 years	47.4% 18 responses
14–19 years	23.7% 9 responses
20–29 years	5.3% 2 responses
30 or more years	2.6% 1 response
<b>Total</b>	<b>38 responses</b>



*Table 5. Content area assignments of survey respondents*

<b>Content Area Taught for Largest Percentage of School Day</b>	<b>Percentage of Total and Number of Responses</b>
Math	13.2% 5
English Language Arts	36.8% 14
Science	10.5% 4
Social Studies	7.9% 3
PE/Health	7.9% 3
Fine Arts	15.8% 6
Related Services	7.9% 3
<b>Total</b>	<b>38 responses</b>

The demographic information for the participants in the focus groups is presented in Tables 6 and 7.

*Table 6. Years of teaching experience of focus group participants*

<b>Years of Completed Teaching Experience</b>	<b>Percent of Total and Number of Participants</b>
0-3 years	7.7% 1 participant
4-8 years	15.4% 2 participants
9-13 years	53.8% 7 participants
14-19 years	23.1% 3 participants
<b>Total</b>	<b>13 participants</b>

*Table 7. Content area assignments of focus group participants*

<b>Content Area Taught for Largest Percentage of School Day</b>	<b>Percentage of Total and Number of Responses</b>
Math	23.1% 3 participants
English Language Arts	38.5% 5 participants
Science	7.7% 1 participant
Social Studies	15.4% 2 participants
Related Services	15.4% 2 participants
Total	13 participants

Ethical considerations surrounding this group of participants address confidentiality and my role as the researcher. First, while I could guarantee that I kept notes, recordings, and data from the focus group confidential, I could not control whether or not the other participants in the focus group maintained confidentiality after the focus group concluded. Second, as an instructional specialist who is at times responsible for initiating and coordinating professional learning, teachers may have been reluctant to share their opinions about professional learning with me.

The risk of harm from these ethical considerations was low, however, as the participants' responses were personal but not highly controversial. In moderating the focus groups, I strove to establish an atmosphere of trust and open conversation.

## **Data Gathering Techniques**

At a staff meeting in September, teachers were briefed on my research question and invited to participate in the study. There were two phases of participation - multiple-choice assessment and focus groups—that occurred in September and October of the 2015–2016 school year. Teachers chose to participate in one or both of the phases.

### **Modes of Teacher Professional Learning Assessment**

In the initial phase of my research, I used the an adapted version of the Modes of Learning Assessment to gather quantitative and qualitative data about teacher attitudes and beliefs about teacher professional learning. The original Modes of Learning Assessment is a seven-question, multiple-choice survey designed by Dr. Richard Elmore (HarvardX, 2014) as part of an EdX massive open online course (MOOC) called Leaders of Learning. Survey questions addressed issues such as learning goals, responsibility for learning, how learning happens, social structure, and definitions of success. Each of the items on the assessment presents the participant with a question and asks the participant to rank the four responses. In email communication with Dr. Elmore, I was informed of his stipulation that all course materials from the Leaders of Learning MOOC were to be open-source, meaning freely available for use and allowed to be redistributed and modified by subsequent users (R. Elmore, personal communication, May 19, 2015).

I used the Google Forms application to create an an adapted version of the survey, revising some of the language to create a focus on teacher professional learning. Since my focus was on collecting data on a group of teachers, I also adapted the response format so that participants were asked to select the one response for each item with which they agreed most strongly. Dr. Elmore’s original survey was prepared to measure beliefs

and attitudes across many contexts of learning. Because my adapted survey focused on specific teacher professional learning, I was aware that some of the response items might not fully reflect the specific beliefs and attitudes of teachers in the context of professional learning. Therefore, an optional open-ended text box was added after each item to allow participants to include any comments or reactions to the items or the selected responses. Hereafter, the adapted version of the survey will be referred to as the Modes of Teacher Professional Learning Assessment. (This survey is included in Appendix A.)

Results from the pool of responses were prepared using the Google Forms application; these results are included in Appendix B. A full discussion and interpretation of the findings is provided in the following section. Participants who wanted individualized results from the survey had the option of including their name, although participants also had the option of remaining anonymous. Participants received the survey through a link sent to their district-provided email addresses, and had one week to complete the survey at their convenience.

### **Focus Groups**

In September of 2015, teachers at Hamlin Middle School were sent an email inviting them to participate in a focus group to review data gathered from the Modes of Teacher Professional Learning Assessment. Three focus groups took place after school from 3:30 to 4:30. Interested teachers used a Google Form to indicate when they preferred to participate. Focus groups were limited to eight people per session. Each focus group occurred in the office that the math specialist and I share.

During the focus group, participants were shown results from the Modes of Teacher Professional Learning Assessment and asked to respond to questions about

whether (and to what extent) the beliefs and attitudes of teachers as revealed in the survey are reflected in the actual experiences of professional learning within the school and district. To keep the conversation flowing, I used categorical questions as suggested by Krueger (1998). The format of the questioning was semi-directed, in that I allowed for open-ended questioning to further explore emerging themes. The questions are included in Appendix C.

The focus groups were audio recorded using a handheld digital recording device.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

#### **Modes of Teacher Professional Learning Assessment**

Quantitative results from the Modes of Teacher Professional Learning Assessment were reported using descriptive statistics. First, results from each of the seven multiple-choice questions were displayed as percentages of the overall responses. Second, each multiple-choice item on the survey was coded to reflect one of four possible modes of learning. According to Elmore (HarvardX, 2014), beliefs about learning can be described on a four-square matrix—the vertical axis of the matrix representing a continuum of individual to collective responsibility, the horizontal axis representing a continuum of hierarchical to distributed structure of knowledge organization (see Figure 1).

Hierarchical Individual	Distributed Individual
Hierarchical Collective	Distributed Collective

Each of the four multiple-choice selections on the survey related to one of the four quadrants. Therefore, each individually completed survey could be viewed holistically by the percentage of total responses that fell within each quadrant, with the highest possible

result for each quadrant being 100%. Furthermore, the collective results from the pool of responses were reported based on how many responses fit into each of the four quadrants.

The optional open-ended responses following each item were coded to reflect perceptions on hierarchical, distributed, collective, or individual modes of learning. Additional codes were added as themes emerged.

Participants who chose to include their email addresses on the assessment were provided with personalized reports that showed their results on each of the four quadrants. They were also provided with descriptors of each of the four quadrants for their reference. A sample report with descriptors is provided in Appendix D.

### **Focus Groups**

The audio recordings of the focus groups were submitted via a secure server to a professional transcriber. The transcriptions were then coded for qualitative analysis. Initially, data was sorted to reflect positive, negative, or ambiguous perceptions on each of the four modes of modes of professional learning. Additional codes were added as themes emerged.

In the following section, I will interpret the findings of my research.

## **SECTION FOUR: FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions about professional learning. In order to learn about teachers' perceptions, I conducted an online survey and two focus group interviews with teachers at Hamlin Middle School. In this section, I will present the findings of the Modes of Professional Learning Survey and the two focus group sessions as they relate to the Modes of Learning Framework (HarvardX, 2014).

The Modes of Learning Framework helps users organize points of view about learning across two continua. The Hierarchical-Distributed continuum addresses how decisions about learning are made and by whom. Perspectives that are more aligned with a hierarchical mode reflect a belief that learning is organized by expert leaders in a scope and sequence, and that learners are responsible for acquiring knowledge and skills that have been deemed important by experts. On the other end of the continuum, distributed modes of learning reflect the belief that determining what is important to learn is primarily the responsibility of the learner, and is not set at an institutional level. The Individual-Collective continuum addresses whether the primary focus of the learning is the solitary learner or a group of learners.

I will begin this section by discussing teachers' perceptions on the hierarchical nature of professional learning, including views about who is responsible for making decisions about professional learning. I will then explain results that reflect teachers' beliefs about effective and ineffective conditions for learning within a hierarchical framework. Finally, I will share findings relating to teachers' perceptions on collective learning experiences.

## **Teachers' Perceptions on the Hierarchical Nature of Professional Learning**

### **Responsibility for Decisions**

Comments made in the focus groups reflected a hierarchical view of professional learning. Several teachers felt that it is the responsibility of the district to provide them with opportunities to learn professionally. One classroom teacher described the many responsibilities she has as a teacher and how she balances those responsibilities with her personal life. She described getting home in the evening and attempting to grade assignments and write lesson plans, in addition to caring for her children. She reported getting in bed with her laptop in order to complete her daily tasks. For this classroom teacher, the school or district handling her professional learning needs was more manageable. She explained, "I'm hoping I'm getting the new PD through the district. I'm trusting the district to keep me current."

The results of the survey supported a perception that the responsibility for coordinating professional learning lies with the district rather than with teachers. When asked, "What are individual teachers responsible for in professional learning?" 76.3% of teachers selected responses that represented a hierarchical view of professional learning in which teachers are responsible for receiving what the district gives them.



Table 8. Teacher perception on responsibility for professional learning

What are individual teachers responsible for in professional learning?		
	76.3% Hierarchical	Individual teachers are responsible for learning the values, norms, and behaviors essential to effective participation in the school or district. <b>(42.1% Hierarchical Collective)</b>
		Individual teachers are responsible for acquiring the knowledge and skills that experts teach them. <b>(34.2% Hierarchical Individual)</b>
	15.8% Distributed Individual	Individual teachers are responsible for initiating and choosing what and how they learn.
	7.9% Distributed Collective	Individual teachers are responsible for joining professional networks or communities in order to learn what they want.

As shown in the chart, the least-selected response (7.9%) regarding teachers’ responsibility was “Teachers are responsible for joining professional networks or communities in order to learn what they want.” Focus group participants were asked to express their views on why this response was the least represented. One participant raised money constraints:

I think it would be great to belong to [The Illinois Reading Association or the National Reading Association], but I don’t think that I should have to pay for that out of pocket. You know, I don’t think that a teacher should have to pay to join these professional organizations and have to pay for them out of their own money.

Another participant responded in disagreement with this statement, explaining that in her view, teachers have a responsibility to keep up with changes within the profession by joining professional networks, “much like a doctor or someone who works with

technology ... I just think there are certain professions that that is part of what we do.” However, she went on to express that in her view, time constraints prevented teachers from joining professional organizations. A third participant agreed that lack of teacher participation in professional networks was more of an issue of time constraints than money constraints, and she acknowledged that many professional networks are free to join.

Discussion about teacher responsibility in joining professional networks eventually cycled back to reflect a perception of responsibility of the school district. Participants explained that they had not joined professional networks because school and district leaders did not remind or encourage them to join, nor had leaders discussed involvement in professional organizations as part of the evaluation process. One participant expressed, “Now that I’m ... hired, I’m in the district, I’ve never been asked ‘What journals are you reading?’”

Discussion among teachers in the focus groups also reflected an uncertainty about what professional networks are available and what they offer in terms of professional learning. When one participant explained that she belongs to the International Literacy Association and reads the organization’s journal, *The Reading Teacher*, another participant responded with the following: “See, and it’s interesting that you say that, because I would love to have something like *The Math Teacher* to subscribe to, but I don’t really know of any math-oriented [publications] like that.” Her statement reveals a lack of awareness about the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the professional journal it publishes, called *Mathematics Teacher*.

Although focus group discussions revealed a perception among teachers that the responsibility for coordinating professional learning lies with the district, there was also ambiguity as to how decisions about professional learning are made. Consider the following example:

**Participant:** I'm wondering if that's driven by data, collective data, you know, from Discovery tests, or AimsWeb, or, I mean, we don't have the ISAT [Illinois Standards Achievement Test] anymore, but I don't know our responses from PARCC [Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers], but maybe administration is driven to make decisions based on data?

**Moderator:** So let me just follow up. You're saying you're wondering if? Do you think that is what happens?

**Participant:** It seems like a lot of decision making is, "We're going to go in this direction." And so I don't know if that's coming from teams, or I don't know if that's directed from admin, you know, based on the data that's collected from the big, you know, our big tests.

This exchange reveals a belief that district leaders make the decisions about professional learning, in addition to an uncertainty about what factors inform how those decisions are made.

### **Conditions for Effective Hierarchical Professional Learning**

While the survey indicated a majority of teachers viewed the purpose of teacher professional learning to be hierarchical, this should not be misinterpreted to suggest that teachers view themselves as strictly passive learners. Focus group participants discussed

that some forms of hierarchical professional learning (i.e., training experiences) were more meaningful than others. Specifically, training experiences that allowed teachers to be actively engaged in applying knowledge and skills were viewed more favorably. One focus group participant explained,

I think, for me, anytime that I'm learning something professional, if I am actually applying what I learned, and I'm actually doing it. This summer I became endorsed in special ed, and we had to do a lot of things, but one of them was research different assistive technology and just the fact of actually going online, finding it, describing it, we also had to write IEPs [individualized education programs], so just the actual experience of having to find the terminology and apply it. I can learn from the textbook, but if I don't do it, I don't learn it as well.

For this teacher, becoming endorsed in special education was a hierarchically defined learning experience. The scope and sequence of requirements to obtain an endorsement is set at an institutional level. Yet, her comments reflect the belief that she had to be actively engaged in order for that experience to be meaningful to her.

Teachers in the focus groups stressed the importance of follow-up in training. Their responses indicated their perception that without follow-up, hierarchical trainings are unlikely to result in implementation. One participant explained,

I also think that's important, when we have those presenters come in, that there's follow-up, or there's a check in the future to make sure, "How is this going?" and just not that day, "This is what you got and that's it," and never hear about it again.

Hierarchical modes of professional learning require participants to be willing to grant expert status to leaders of learning. Focus group findings reflected the importance of valuing experts. Statements made suggested that teachers are willing to grant expert status to outside consultants if they feel that the experts have gained knowledge and skills through a combination of research and experience. Focus group discussion stressed the importance of hiring an expert who is “on top of what’s current, rather than what she herself experienced as an educator 30 years ago.” Focus group participants also discussed that they value experts who are able to support their background knowledge and lived experiences with empirical evidence, and who have a representative view of what is happening in the field of education. The teachers in the focus group reported that they were more likely to value an expert who “goes into other classrooms and sees, not just the classrooms that hire her. She goes into other places and other schools to see what’s happening and what’s working and what’s not.” Focus group respondents also reported being more likely to trust an expert who is not what they described as “politically correct.” Consider the following statement:

[The expert will] say, “This is what the data shows, your superintendent might disagree,” but she’s not afraid to say it because she has her years of knowledge to back herself up, whereas other presenters might have a fear of if they talked against the superintendent they could get fired, or they could be released from the district as a consultant.

While findings suggested that teachers have specific criteria that individuals must meet before being granted expert status, the focus group discussion also revealed teachers’ perceptions that ultimately, the person who hires consultants within the district

office may not have specific criteria for who is an expert. One focus group participant explained,

I think throughout the years we've seen some people that have had connections within the district office come in, and then we've seen people that have come in and no follow-up has been done ... Sometimes I think it's just who's available.

Within a system of professional learning recognized by teachers as being hierarchical, the findings suggested that teachers value structures that give them a voice within the hierarchical mode. One such outlet discussed by teachers in the focus groups was the position of instructional specialists. Instructional specialists are teachers who do not serve students directly, but instead support classroom teachers through co-teaching, coaching, and professional development. Teachers perceive specialist positions as being an intermediary step between the hierarchical authority of district and building leadership, and a distributed approach that authorizes teachers to make their own decisions about professional learning. In the focus group, one teacher explained the relationship between her grade-level team of English language arts teachers and the instructional specialist:

When we have a question, like when we are stumped by something, if we can't get over this hurdle we go to [the instructional specialist]. And then she usually like tells us which path to go down to find it, or she helps us find it, or she finds it and presents it to us.

A math teacher in the other focus group described a similar relationship between her grade-level team and their instructional specialist.

She is hearing what we're talking about that we want to learn more about, kind of taking all of our feedback, organizing our feedback, and then coming back at us and saying, "Okay, so what I'm hearing is you want more of this." And that's really fantastic, because as much as I would love to say that I am that organized, I'm so overwhelmed with everything else, that I don't know that I necessarily would be doing that on my own.

Teacher perception on the importance of choice within a hierarchical framework was further revealed in the survey and focus groups. One survey respondent explained, Teachers (and others) learn best when they are part of the selection process in terms of what they learn. However, it is important that, as part of a team, they learn those things which have been deemed important to the organization as a whole.

A teacher in the focus group expressed a similar sentiment in a comment about having a menu of options for professional learning that are still aligned to district goals. "[It] is what we do with our students, so it only makes sense."

Even though findings from the survey and focus groups revealed that teachers value a hierarchical mode of professional learning in certain situations, the role of the district in recognizing and validating successful learning was not something that teachers valued overall. When asked, "What constitutes successful professional learning?" only one survey respondent out of 38 selected the response, "Successful professional learning is expressed via a certificate or recognition from an institution or expert." This suggests that even though teachers rely on the district to provide professional learning

opportunities, they are less likely to look to the district to measure the success of that learning.

### **Conditions for Ineffective Hierarchical Professional Learning**

While the above findings represented a generally positive view on the hierarchical nature of teacher professional learning, additional findings indicated that teachers also have negative impressions of the hierarchical mode. In response to the survey question, “What is worth learning professionally as a teacher?” one survey respondent added the following comment: “Most PD is not geared toward anything I will need to know to be a better teacher, it’s purely for the sake of the district.” A focus group participant echoed this sentiment: “I have never gotten a giant sense that the district truly cares about what we’re interested in learning.”

Discussion in the focus groups reflected the frustration that participants feel when decisions made in the hierarchical mode do not reflect perceived teacher learning needs. One focus group participant explained:

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve left a PD frustrated because I came optimistic, interested in learning, and I left feeling like I just wasted my day. I didn’t really learn anything that I could really take back into the classroom and apply, not to say that the things I was learning weren’t good. They were absolutely. We’ve had some valuable experiences in PDs and things like that, but if it’s not something I can take back and apply into my classroom, it could be the greatest strategy in the world, but if I can’t use it, that’s frustrating.



Similar instances of frustration were expressed in situations when participants perceived that professional learning decisions were not made with their best interests in mind. Examples of this were a special education teacher receiving training in general academic content, but not in how to apply that content to special education populations; another example was electives teachers having to “sit through PD that doesn’t really apply to them.” Another participant shared her experience with a state-mandated asthma training.

We had to sit there in asthma, like two hours of how to deal with asthma, and everyone checked out, including me. I couldn’t be less interested in the topic. But then I found out that it was state-mandated—two hour, three hour? I was annoyed and bitter that I had to sit through it for three hours.

This quote represents the potential for teachers’ negative emotional reactions when they perceive that the focus of professional learning is on compliance with mandates.

### **Teachers’ Perceptions on Distributed Responsibility in Professional Learning**

The findings of the focus group revealed some instances in which teachers are exercising primary control for their own learning in a more distributed mode of professional learning. One teacher in the focus group described reading professional books and journals as being a method of taking responsibility for professional learning. Several other teachers in the focus groups described using the Internet as a way of accepting distributed responsibility for their own learning. Examples included using social media tools like Facebook, websites like Edutopia, YouTube videos of classroom instruction, and online communities organized around specific topics like Smart Boards

or gifted education. One teacher referenced viewing webinars to keep current in her content area.

Teachers also reported accepting responsibility for professional learning when they felt that the hierarchical structure has not provided them with what they need. Consider the following explanation of teachers preparing for a one-to-one Chromebook initiative.

I know a couple of 8th-grade teachers that know that Chromebooks are coming. So they took it upon themselves to sign up for classes because they know that that's something that's coming. Now unfortunately our district did not provide teachers with the training that they needed, but I feel that those teachers want to be ready for that. I mean they took that upon themselves and they're paying out of their own pocket so that's something that's going to affect them directly.

When asked what other structures of professional learning they would recommend for the school, focus group participants' answers largely reflected a distributed approach to professional learning. Responses included peer observation, lesson showcases, and peer shadowing. Another participant suggested rotating responsibility for professional development presentations among team members on a monthly basis.

### **Teachers' Perceptions on Collective Learning Experiences**

Survey responses reflected a strong teacher preference for collective learning experiences. When asked, "How do teachers learn best?" a majority of responses (60.5%) indicated a preference for experiences that place teachers in a strong community of colleagues that is motivated by shared interests and values. In a related question about the

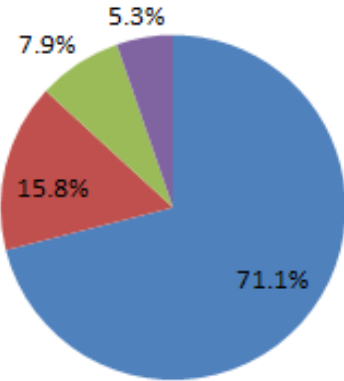
definition of professional learning, the majority of teachers (60.5%) expressed the importance of cooperation among teachers with diverse knowledge and skills.

These views of professional learning as having a collective focus were discussed by several focus group participants. One participant remembered a time when she worked collaboratively with an instructional specialist to understand a standards document and develop a unit aligned to the standards. She recalls,

Going back and forth and dissecting the language, analyzing it, coming up with a unit ... implementing it and sharing it with the other social studies teachers. And then all of us implementing it ... talking about what works, what doesn't work, how can you make it different? How could you make it better?

This statement reflects the perceived importance of exchanging ideas in order to create a shared understanding of new concepts. By doing this, teachers feel they are making a contribution to a communal knowledge base, which was strongly valued on the survey as demonstrated below.

Table 9. Teachers' perceptions on how professional learning occurs.

How does professional learning occur?		
	71.1% Distributed Collective	Professional learning occurs when individuals engage in activities that have meaning to them and contribute to their own as well as a communal knowledge base.
	15.8% Hierarchical Collective	Professional learning occurs when experts create a purposefully constructed learning community.
	7.9% Distributed Individual	Professional learning occurs when individuals have to make sense of competing and diverse sources of information.
	5.3% Hierarchical Individual	Professional learning occurs when experts provide scaffolding and sequencing to build knowledge and skills.

Participants in the focus groups were asked to explain what they believe it means to contribute to a communal knowledge base. Responses reflected a perceived personal obligation to other members on their team, as in the following example.

When we are ever stumped and we do the thing where a question is posed and we sit and stare at each other, I feel personal failure. I feel like I am failing my team, even though it's not resting on my responsibility, but I do feel responsibility that we help each other out ... That's what communal knowledge means.

Although survey responses and focus group findings suggested a strong preference for collective learning experiences, one focus group participant discussed her perception that it is still the responsibility of the school and district to create conditions to support collective learning. She stated,

I feel like [collective learning] is being fostered already with allowing us to have

an extra plan time ... We're almost, in a way, I don't want to say forced to work together, but kind of. I mean, but not necessarily in a negative way.

One explanation for teacher preference for collective learning is teachers' perception that collective learning is more likely to lead to large-scale change. One participant described her experience being sent to a training in a large group of teachers:

They sent eight of us to that one day co-teaching PD, and we could all come back and talk and make change together. Whereas if it would just had been me and [my co-teaching partner] we wouldn't be able to incite any change, there's just two of us ... Two people can't change a school.

This quote illustrates that some teachers perceive the function of professional learning is to bring about large-scale change, and not merely to advance an individual teacher's knowledge and skill.

### **Conclusion**

In this section, I have presented the findings of the Modes of Professional Learning Assessment and the follow-up focus group discussions in order to understand teachers' perceptions on professional learning. I have interpreted those findings through the lens of the Modes of Learning Framework (HarvardX, 2014). I began by discussing findings that suggest teachers perceive the purpose of professional learning to be hierarchical in nature, and view decisions about professional learning to be primarily a district responsibility. I then shared findings relating to a perceived lack of personal responsibility for joining networks for professional learning. Next, I reviewed data that revealed teachers' perceptions about effective forms of hierarchical learning, as well as negative reactions to district-led professional learning. Finally, I shared findings that

illustrated teachers' preferences for collective learning structures. In the upcoming section, I will share my judgments about teachers' perceptions on professional learning, and provide recommendations for improving professional learning within the school and district.

## **SECTION FIVE: JUDGMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Introduction**

In this program evaluation, I have sought to uncover teachers' perceptions on professional learning as they relate to the Modes of Learning Framework (HarvardX, 2014). In this section, I will share my judgements about teachers' perceptions about professional learning at Hamlin Middle School and will make recommendations as to what school and district leaders can do to improve professional learning in light of teachers' perceptions. I will begin by discussing my conclusions about the hierarchical mode of learning in terms of the related themes of trust and training with follow-up. Then I will share conclusions about the importance of valuing the individual-distributed mode of learning. I will finish by discussing judgments and recommendations about collective modes of teacher professional learning.

### **“I Need to Trust My District”**

Through my review of the literature and my analysis of survey results and focus group findings, I have concluded that teachers at Hamlin Middle School want to be able to trust the school and district to make informed decisions about professional learning, and to provide them with access to learning opportunities that will make them more effective teachers. Teachers recognize that there are often financial constraints that prevent them from seeking out their own professional learning. Even moreso, the many responsibilities related to teaching create time constraints, as teachers become fully immersed in the day-to-day work of classroom instruction. Like scuba divers five meters underwater (Hargreaves, 2003), teachers look to the hierarchical structures of school and district leadership to provide directives about professional learning.

Unfortunately, as much as teachers want to be able to trust school and district leaders, certain experiences have compromised their ability to do so. Teachers have had to sit through trainings they don't feel apply to them. They have endured one-and-done workshops without follow-up support. They have seen initiatives come through the district that, in their perception, have not been adequately supported with professional growth opportunities. They have seen initiatives vanish as quickly as they came. These experiences have at times left teachers feeling frustrated, bitter, and annoyed. This conflict is not unique to Hamlin Middle School. Negative feelings toward professional learning can have detrimental effects for teachers' engagement in future professional learning experiences (Elmore, 2002).

**Recommendation 1: School and District Leaders Should Make Conscious and Concerted Efforts to Build Trust.**

- *Be transparent about how decisions about professional learning were made and by whom.* Why are teachers being asked to engage in professional learning? Were there evident trends in classroom observations or instructional rounds that indicated a need for staff development? Are there instructional shifts evidenced in newly adopted standards documents that teachers will be required to make? Does demonstrated student learning suggest a need for teachers to learn new ways of approaching instruction? School and district leaders should be careful to differentiate between student learning and student testing. If data from high-stakes tests is used to inform professional development decisions, school and district leadership will need to interpret that data in pursuit of student learning, and not merely increased test scores (Schlechty, 1990; Joyce & Showers, 2002).



- *Explicitly communicate the balance between learning and accountability.*  
Teachers need to know that they will not be held accountable for something they do not know how to do and have not been given the opportunity to learn.
- *Grant “expert” status to outside consultants very thoughtfully.* Presenters and consultants who have gained knowledge and skills through a combination of research within the field and experience in classrooms may be the most valuable. School and district leaders should not attempt to filter content from outside experts so that it aligns with district objectives. Instead, leaders should be open to conflicting perspectives and have safe processes in place for teachers to make sense of competing viewpoints. Finally, school and district leaders would be wise to avoid reproach about hiring practices based on nepotism. If consultants are hired based on prior work experience with school or district leadership, leaders should be transparent about that relationship and be prepared to demonstrate how the previously shared experience resulted in demonstrable gains in student achievement.
- *Provide teachers with choice.* This can be done through allowing teachers to select sessions at institute days, or having teachers work together to set their own agendas for common meeting time.
- *Don’t waste teachers’ time.* If the content of a planned professional development session does not apply to someone, give him or her permission to opt out and trust that they will use that time for growth and learning. Teachers should not be asked to sit through training on a program they will never use, or on content they do not teach.

- *Evaluate professional development on multiple levels and use evaluation findings to improve the program.* While professional development evaluation commonly addresses participants’ reactions to the experience, Guskey (2000) stressed the importance using multiple levels of evaluation. In addition to participants’ reactions, school and district leadership should evaluate professional development in terms of the following:
  - Participants’ learning
  - Organization support and change
  - Participants’ use of new knowledge and skills
  - Student learning outcomes (p. 82)

Thorough evaluation of the professional learning program will assure teachers that their learning and the improved learning of students is kept in focus at all times.

### **“That Day, ‘This Is What You Got, And That’s It’”**

Related to the concept of trust, but worthy of its own discussion, is the idea of training with follow-up. My research has led me to conclude that while teachers at Hamlin Middle School depend on hierarchical modes of learning, they value the training more if there are systems put in place that allow them to apply new knowledge and skills in a supportive environment. The importance of providing follow-up to training is well-supported in the literature (Joyce & Calhoun, 2010).

### **Recommendation 2: Provide Follow-Up to Training to the Greatest Extent Possible.**

- *Be intentional and explicit about following up on professional development events.* Much time is spent preparing for a professional development event, but

how much time is spent preparing for the follow-up? In addition to preparing the facilitator's guides, slideshows, and handouts, school and district leaders should devote equal time and attention to how follow-up will be provided and by whom. If a consultant is being brought in from outside the district to present, will he or she be available to provide follow-up? If not, who within the district can spearhead efforts for ongoing support? If possible, provide follow-up by doing the following:

- Plan demonstration lessons and identify demonstration classrooms.
  - Make time for collaborative work.
  - Make peer coaching available (Joyce & Calhoun, 2010).
- *Establish an accountability timeline.* Make sure teachers know they will not be held accountable for performance until they have had adequate time to learn the knowledge or skills presented. This will allow teachers time to integrate new learning into their existing knowledge and experiences, or to reframe their understanding in response to the new learning. However, schools or districts should define what will be expected of teachers and establish a timeline for when performance will be measured. If teachers are asked to engage in learning and are provided opportunities to do so, being held accountable for that learning communicates the expectation for professional growth (Elmore, 2000).
  - *Use information from evaluation of professional development to inform decisions about ongoing support.* As noted above, evaluation of professional learning should go beyond an initial assessment of participants' reactions to the learning event. By continuing to evaluate professional learning in terms of its impact on

changing practices and improved results for students, the types of follow-up support needed will be clearly indicated.

**“I’ve Never Been Asked, ‘What Journals Are You Reading?’”**

Teacher involvement in learning networks outside of the school or district, such as professional organizations or online networks, is not perceived by teachers at Hamlin Middle School to be a highly valuable mode of professional learning. Citing time and money constraints, or a perceived failure by the district to remind or encourage them to become involved, the majority of teachers do not seek out learning opportunities outside of what the district provides.

In my judgment, this is highly problematic for several reasons. First, teachers’ lack of personal responsibility for their own learning leads to a dependence on the district. Realistically, the district could never provide adequate time and resources to meet the needs of every teacher for every purpose. Teachers must take some responsibility for their own learning to compensate for the gaps in what even the most well-resourced districts would be able to provide. Second, lack of personal responsibility in joining professional networks leads to decreased feelings of teacher professionalism, which can impact student achievement. Third, teacher participation in professional learning outside the district can lead to innovations in classroom practice beyond what was considered by school or district leadership. Finally, by taking responsibility for their own learning, teachers are modeling the type of learning we would want for our students—learning that is self-directed, intrinsically motivated, and demonstrates a true passion for the subject matter.

As a result of this research, I have followed up with my teacher colleagues to make recommendations as to how they can assume more personal responsibility for their learning. I have shared information about various professional organizations with links to online membership registration. I have encouraged teachers to take advantage of massive online open courses (MOOCs), and have provided information for registration. I have supported a teacher's efforts to begin a book discussion group on the topic of racial equality in the classroom. In my role as an instructional specialist, I will continue to encourage teachers to take more personal responsibility for their learning. The following recommendation focuses on school and district leaders.

**Recommendation 3: Value Individual Distributed Forms of Learning.**

- *Develop and communicate a strong central vision.* As noted in the literature review, valuing an individual-distributed form of learning does not diminish the need for a strong central vision (Schlechty, 1997). By developing and clearly communicating focus areas for improvement, and by implementing a timeline for reaching goals, the district does an excellent job at establishing this vision. However, without also communicating high expectations for adult learning, the district may be limiting teachers in their ability to work toward the achievement of those goals. In my judgment, the district should leave room for individual-distributed modes of professional learning to encourage participation toward meeting those goals. A one-size-fits-all approach does not lead to realizing a shared vision. In my opinion, school and district leaders would be better served to communicate a message akin to, “Here is the vision we are all aspiring to, but we

might not all have the same paths for getting there. We value you as adult learners and acknowledge your efforts to learn in pursuit of the vision.”

- *Encourage the development of teacher leaders* (National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, 2007). This aspect of recommendation 3 contains several steps:
  - *Identify and eliminate barriers to teacher leadership.* In my experience, some teachers avoid assuming roles as teacher leaders not because they lack capacity or commitment, but because their plates are already full with their day-to-day professional responsibilities. School and district leaders should take careful note of the daily working conditions of teachers to ensure they are not unduly burdened with ineffective procedures. Is the process for submitting and maintaining discipline referrals as streamlined as possible? Are teachers equipped with the materials they need to perform their jobs? Are the expectations for paperwork and documentation appropriate? Effective leaders should seek to eliminate as many barriers as possible so that teachers have the time and mental energy necessary to assume leadership roles in pursuit of the central vision.
  - *Establish cultural conditions that encourage taking initiative.* School and district leaders should foster teacher professionalism by encouraging teachers to take initiative to realize the central vision of the organization. Are teachers empowered to make and carry out decisions to further their own learning? Do they need permission to start a teacher book study group? Are they required to submit a proposal to implement a peer

observation program? How are expectations for shared responsibility communicated and encouraged? By establishing a school- or district-wide culture that focuses on inquiry and reflective practice, the school and district can empower teachers to grow and develop as leaders.

- *Recognize teacher leaders.* School and district leadership should recognize teachers who have taken leadership roles in supporting the district’s central vision. However, some forms of recognition are more valued by teachers than others. While the survey findings show that teachers place a low value on certificates or formal recognitions, a word of heartfelt praise or shared stories of positive impact could go a long way.
- *Hold teachers accountable for growing and developing professionally.*

Danielson’s (2007) Framework for Teaching dedicates Component 4e to growing and developing professionally. A teacher who is distinguished in this area “seeks out opportunities for professional development and makes a systematic attempt to conduct action research in his classroom” (p. 105). I strongly recommend that teachers not be given a free pass on this. To elevate the profession, teachers must be held accountable for acting like professionals.

### **“Two People Can’t Change a School”**

After engaging in research alongside my colleagues, and developing professional relationships, I have come to the strong conclusion that the teachers at Hamlin Middle School are firmly committed to bringing about positive change. They are not satisfied with closing their doors and having a limited potential impact on the students in front of them; they want to be a part of something larger to make a much wider impact. They

know that they cannot do it alone, that if the central vision of the district is to become a reality, it will take a collective effort. This conclusion supports the profound respect I have for the teachers at Hamlin Middle School.

**Recommendation 4: Invest in Collective Learning Experiences to Maximize the Potential for Large-Scale Change.**

- *Continue to ensure that the daily schedule allows for common plan and professional learning time.* Since 2012, the teacher schedule at Hamlin Middle School has allowed for daily common plan time. Beginning in 2015, one day a week has been designated for professional learning. School and district leadership should make the preservation of this time a top priority.
- *Send groups of teachers to conferences.* From my personal experience, teachers usually feel a sense of renewal and optimism when attending conferences outside the district. However, despite every intention of coming back to the district and sharing new learning with colleagues, a return to daily responsibilities of teaching brings with it a return to business-as-usual practices. To get the greatest return on investment, the district should make every attempt to send a group of three or more teachers to a conference. This will communicate to teachers that not only is the district willing to invest in the learning of the *individual* teacher, but that the learning expected to take place is so critical that the district is willing to invest in a *group* of teachers. Teachers working together can bring about a change.

**Conclusion**

I conducted this program evaluation to better understand teachers' perceptions on professional learning. It is my belief that school systems must respond to societal changes



by drastically shifting the purpose and structure of American schooling. This shift will not be possible without substantial attention paid to how in-practice teachers learn and develop professionally. Using the Modes of Learning Framework (HarvardX, 2014) as a tool for analysis has helped me uncover teachers' perceptions about the hierarchical nature of professional learning and their desires to have collective learning experiences. I urge school and district leaders to follow the recommendations set forth in this program evaluation to honor teachers as they learn professionally.

## REFERENCES

- Borko, H. (2004). Professional development and teacher learning: Mapping the terrain. *American Educational Researcher*, 33(8), 3–15.
- Colbert, J. A., Brown, R. S., SunHee, C., & Thomas, S. (2008). An investigation of the impacts of teacher-driven professional development on pedagogy and student learning. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 35(2), 135–154.
- Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2015). About the standards. Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/>
- Danielson, C. (2007). *Enhancing professional practice a framework for teaching* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Delehant, A., & Easton, L.B. (2015). Systems: The context for learning. In L.B. Easton (Ed.), *Powerful designs for professional learning* (29–43). Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.
- Drago-Severson, E. (2009). *Leading adult learning: Supporting adult development in our schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Elmore, R. (2002). *The imperative: Investment in human skill and knowledge*. Washington, DC: Albert Shanker Institute.
- Federal No Child Left Behind programs to help teachers, teaching today, Glencoe online. (2005). Retrieved from [http://www.glencoe.com/sec/teachingtoday/subject/prof\\_development.phtml](http://www.glencoe.com/sec/teachingtoday/subject/prof_development.phtml)

- Greer, C. H., & Morrison, J. Q. (2008). The impact of the collective efficacy of a school community on individual professional development outcomes. *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, 21(4), 32–38.
- Gregson, J. A., & Sturko, P. A. (2007). Teachers as adult learners: Re-conceptualizing professional development. *Journal of Adult Education*, 36(1), 1–18.
- Guskey, T., & Yoon, K. (2009). What works in professional development? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(7), 495–500.
- Hawley, W. D., & Valli, L. (1999). The essentials of effective professional development: A new consensus. In L. Darling-Hammond & G. Sykes (Eds.) *Teaching as the learning profession: Handbook of policy and practice* (151–180). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc.
- Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing teachers, changing times: Teachers' work and culture in the postmodern age*. London: Cassell Publishing.
- Hargreaves, A. (2003). *Teaching in the knowledge society: Education in the age of insecurity*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- HarvardX. (Producer). (2014). *Leaders of learning* [MOOC]. Retrieved from <https://courses.edx.org/courses/HarvardX/GSE2x/2T2014/info>
- Joyce, B., & Calhoun, E. (2010). *Models of professional development: A celebration of educators*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Joyce, B., & Showers, B. (2002). *Student achievement through staff development* (3rd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Knowles, M., Holton, E., & Swanson, R. (2011). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (7th ed.). Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Krueger, R. (1998). *Developing questions for focus groups*. Thousand Oaks, Ca.: SAGE Publications.

Little, J. W. (1993). *Teachers' professional development in a climate of educational reform. NCREST Reprint Series*.

Murray, A. (2010). Empowering teachers through professional development. *English Teaching Forum*, 48(1), 2-11.

National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (2007). *Key issue: Enhancing teacher leadership*. Retrieved from <http://www.gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/docs/EnhancingTeacherLeadership.pdf>

Patton, M. Q. (2008). *Utilization-focused evaluation* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Parise, L. M., & Spillane, J. P. (2010). Teacher learning and instructional change: How formal and on-the-job learning opportunities predict change in elementary school teachers' practice. *Elementary School Journal*, 110(3), 323–346.

Robinson, K. (2010, October). *Ken Robinson: Changing education paradigms* [Video file] Retrieved from [http://www.ted.com/talks/ken\\_robinson\\_changing\\_education\\_paradigms](http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_changing_education_paradigms)

- Romanish, B. (1993). Teacher empowerment as the focus of school restructuring. *School Community Journal*, 3(1), 47–60.
- Saavedra, A., & Opfer, V. (2012). Learning 21st-century skills requires 21st-century teaching. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 94(2), 8–13.
- Schlechty, P. (1990). *Schools for the twenty-first century: Leadership imperatives for educational reform*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Schlechty, P. (1997). *Inventing better schools: An action plan for educational reform*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Sparks, D. (2004). The looming danger of a two-tiered professional development system. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86(4), 304–306.
- Standards for Professional Learning. (2015). Retrieved June 15, 2015, from [http://learningforward.org/standards-for-professional-learning#.VX6\\_kuuhm4w](http://learningforward.org/standards-for-professional-learning#.VX6_kuuhm4w)
- Timperley, H. (2008). *Teacher professional learning and development. Educational Practices Series-18*. International Academy of Education (IAE) and International Bureau of Education. Retrieved from [http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Publications/Educational\\_Practices/EdPractices\\_18.pdf](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/Educational_Practices/EdPractices_18.pdf)
- Wagner, T. (2008). *The global achievement gap: Why even our best schools don't teach the new survival skills our children need—and what we can do about it*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

## APPENDIX A: MODES OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

### ASSESSMENT

*This survey is based on the Modes of Learning Assessment (MOLA) by Dr. Richard Elmore of Harvard University. It has been adapted with Dr. Elmore's permission.*

#### **What is the purpose of teacher professional learning?**

*Select the answer choice with which you MOST STRONGLY agree.*

- 
- The purpose of teacher professional learning is to gain access to knowledge that is valued in the school or district.
  - The purpose of teacher professional learning is to know how to participate in a school community with others of diverse, competing, and broadly distributed viewpoints.
  - The purpose of teacher professional learning is to live up to one's unique individual potential as a teacher.
  - The purpose of teacher professional learning is to become a responsible, contributing member of the school or district.

Are there any comments or reactions you wish to share? (optional)

#### **In terms of professional learning, what is worth learning?**

*Select the answer choice with which you MOST STRONGLY agree.*

- 
- What is worth learning professionally is determined by communities within the school or district that are formed around mutual interest.
  - What is worth learning professionally can only be determined by the individual teacher for her/himself.
  - What is worth learning professionally is represented in the common values, rules, and routines of the school or district.
  - What is worth learning professionally is measured by clear standards and assessments set by school or district leadership.

Are there any comments or reactions you wish to share? (optional)

### **How do teachers learn best?**

*Select the answer choice with which you MOST STRONGLY agree.*

---

- Teachers learn best when motivated by pursuing shared interests, values, and preferences with others.
- Teachers learn best when they make individual choices about what they learn.
- Teachers learn best in educational institutions that provide them with competent instructors or trainers.
- Teachers learn best in a strong community that provides a positive social environment for learning.

Are there any comments or reactions you wish to share? (optional)

### **What are individual teachers responsible for in learning?**

*Select the answer choice with which you MOST STRONGLY agree.*

---

- Individual teachers are responsible for acquiring the knowledge and skills that the school and district teach them.
- Individual teachers are responsible for initiating and choosing what and how they learn.
- Individual teachers are responsible for joining networks or communities in order to learn what they want.
- Individual teachers are responsible for learning the values, norms, and behaviors essential to effective participation in the school or district.

Are there any comments or reactions you wish to share? (optional)

### **How does professional learning occur?**

*Select the answer choice with which you MOST STRONGLY agree.*

---

- Professional learning occurs when individual teachers engage in activities that have meaning to them and contribute to their own as well as a communal knowledge base.
- Professional learning occurs when experts provide scaffolding and sequencing to build knowledge and skill.
- Professional learning occurs when individuals have to make sense of competing and diverse sources of knowledge, skill, and expertise.

- Professional learning occurs when school leaders create a purposefully constructed learning community.

Are there any comments or reactions you wish to share? (optional)

### **What is the definition of professional learning?**

*Select the answer choice with which you MOST STRONGLY agree.*

- 
- Professional learning is a collective activity requiring cooperation among people with diverse knowledge and skills.
  - Professional learning is an individual imperative that is driven by individual interests.
  - Professional learning is a social activity guided by school leaders who create learning opportunities.
  - Learning is the transfer of knowledge and skill from an expert to a novice.

Are there any comments or reactions you wish to share? (optional)

### **What constitutes successful professional learning?**

*Select the answer choice with which you MOST STRONGLY agree.*

- 
- Successful professional learning can only be defined by the individual teacher.
  - Successful professional learning means an exchange of ideas among teachers in a school community.
  - Successful professional learning is expressed via certification or recognition from the school or district.
  - Successful professional learning is expressed via recognition by and positive participation in a school community.

Are there any comments or reactions you wish to share? (optional)

### **Which statement *best* reflects the relationship between student outcomes and professional learning?**

*Select the answer choice with which you MOST STRONGLY agree.*

- Demonstrated student outcomes help define the need for professional learning, and inform what the content and format of professional learning should be.



- Professional learning helps shape expectations for student outcomes, and informs what the valued student outcomes should be.

Are there any comments or reactions you wish to share? (optional)

**Please select the content area that you teach for the largest percentage of the day:**

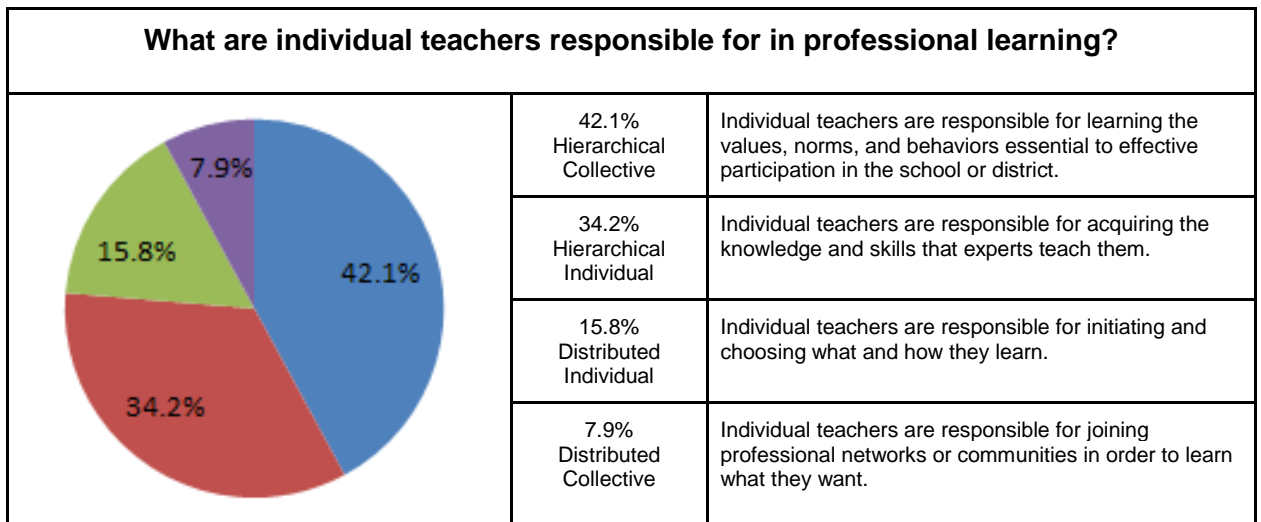
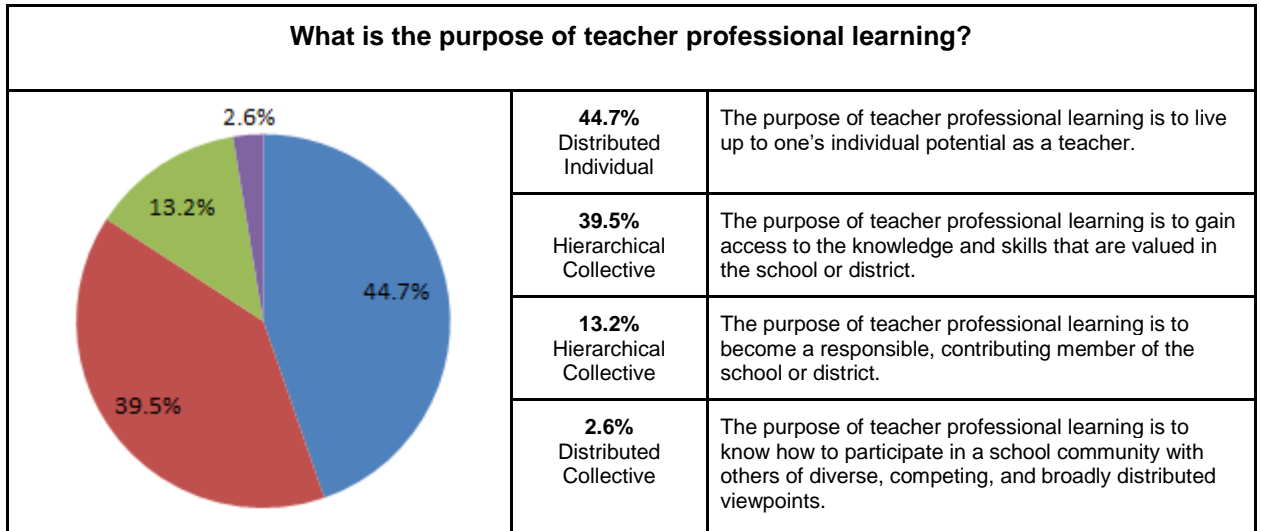
- Math
- English Language Arts
- Science
- Social Studies
- PE/Health
- Fine Arts
- Related Services

**Please select your years of completed teaching experience:**

- 0-3 years
- 4-8 years
- 9-13 years
- 14-18 years
- 19-29 years
- more than 30 years

## APPENDIX B: RESULTS OF MODES OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

### ASSESSMENT

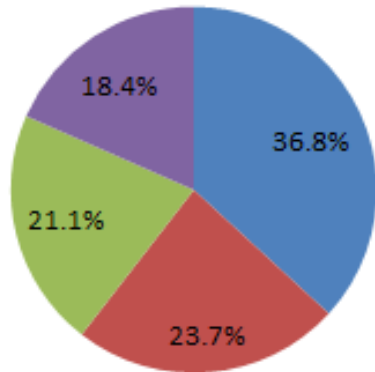


What constitutes successful professional learning?		
	60.5% Distributed Collective	Successful professional learning means an exchange of ideas among learners in a community.
	21.1% Distributed Individual	Successful professional learning can only be measured by the individual teacher.
	15.8% Hierarchical Collective	Successful professional learning is expressed via recognition by and positive participation in a school community.
	2.6% Hierarchical Individual	Successful professional learning is expressed via a certificate or recognition from an institution or expert.

What is the definition of teacher professional learning?		
	60.5% Distributed Collective	Teacher professional learning is a collective activity requiring cooperation among teachers with diverse knowledge and skills.
	18.4% Hierarchical Individual	Teacher professional learning is the transfer of knowledge and skill from an expert to a novice.
	13.2% Distributed Individual	Teacher professional learning is an individual imperative driven by individual interests and goals.
	7.9% Hierarchical Collective	Teacher professional learning is a social activity guided by experts who create learning opportunities.

How does professional learning occur?		
	71.1% Distributed Collective	Professional learning occurs when individuals engage in activities that have meaning to them and contribute to their own as well as a communal knowledge base.
	15.8% Hierarchical Collective	Professional learning occurs when experts create a purposefully constructed learning community.
	7.9% Distributed Individual	Professional learning occurs when individuals have to make sense of competing and diverse sources of information.
	5.3% Hierarchical Individual	Professional learning occurs when experts provide scaffolding and sequencing to build knowledge and skills.

### How do teachers learn best?



36.8%  
Hierarchical  
Collective

Teachers learn best in a strong community of colleagues that provides a positive social environment for learning.

23.7%  
Distributed  
Collective

Teachers learn best when motivated by pursuing shared interests, values, and preferences with other teachers.

21.1%  
Distributed  
Individual

Teachers learn best when they make individual choices about what they learn.

18.4%  
Hierarchical  
Individual

Teachers learn best when the school or district provides them with competent instructors or trainers.

## APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

<b>Question Type and Purpose</b> <i>(Krueger, 1998, p. 22)</i>	<b>Stimulus</b>	<b>Question</b>
<b>REVIEW OF INFORMED CONSENT AND CONFIDENTIALITY</b>	<b>Intro Slide</b>	<i>Because we will be discussing personal opinions, I would like to stress the importance of keeping information discussed in the focus groups confidential. Can I have each participant's verbal agreement to not discuss this outside of the focus group?</i>
<b>Opening</b> <i>Participants get acquainted and feel connected</i>		What is something you are in the process of learning about now?
<b>Transition</b> <i>Moves smoothly and seamlessly into key questions</i>		Think back to a time in the last three years that you were particularly successful at learning something professionally. Describe the experience.
<b>INTRO TO KEY QUESTION</b>	<b>Modes of Learning Graphic</b>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>The Modes of Professional Learning Assessment you took for this study was adapted from Dr. Richard Elmore's (2014) Modes of Learning Framework. The purpose of the Modes of Learning Framework is to help organize points of view about learning into four quadrants as a way of developing one's personal theory of learning.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The horizontal axis of the matrix shows the continuum between hierarchical and distributed modes of learning. It addresses how learning is structured, sequenced, and organized, and by whom. The vertical axis displays the continuum between individual and collective learning. It answers whether learning is focused on the individual learner, or on learning as a social process.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>For the purposes of this research, I use the term teacher professional learning to categorize any type of learning that teachers experience to learn more about content or pedagogy.</i></p>

		Describe format of focus group - look at data to highlight and comment
<p><b>Key</b> <i>Obtains insight on areas of central concern in the study</i></p>	<p><b>Hierarchical - Question:</b>          What is the purpose of teacher professional learning?          graph 1 (internalizing institutional values)</p>	<p>Who decides what knowledge and skills are necessary?          How do we decide who the experts are?</p>
	<p><b>Hierarchical Question:</b>          What is worth learning professionally as a teacher?          quote - I would also like to add that what the district says, goes. I have my own beliefs about what is important for me to learn and be able to teach, but I also know that sometimes I didn't know what I need to know. Most PD is not geared toward anything I will need to know to be a better teacher, it's purely for the sake of the district.</p>	<p>To what extent is trust in authority a factor that influences how professional development is perceived?</p>
	<p><b>Distributed - Question:</b>          What are individual teachers responsible for in professional learning?          quote - Teachers need to advocate</p>	<p>What types of professional learning can teachers engage in without district involvement or approval?          To what extent are those opportunities utilized? Why?</p>

	for their learning, asking to attend conferences/classes, etc.	
	<b>Distributed - Question:</b> What are individual teachers responsible for in professional learning? Graph 4	What are some examples of professional networks or communities that teachers could join?  To what extent are those opportunities utilized? Why?
	<b>Collective - Question:</b> How does professional learning occur? Graph 5	What does it mean to “contribute to a communal knowledge base”?  How is that demonstrated at this school?
	<b>Collective - Question:</b> What is the definition of teacher professional learning? Graph 6	What role has cooperation played in your own teacher professional learning?  How can cooperation be encouraged?
	<b>Collective - Question:</b> What constitutes successful professional learning? Graph 7	What do we do to build and maintain a learning community?  What more can we do?
	<b>Overall Lincoln Results</b>	
<b>Ending</b> <i>Helps researchers</i>		If you were in charge of promoting teacher professional learning at Lincoln Middle School, what would you do?

<i>determine where to place emphasis and brings closure to the discussion</i>		
<b>Closure</b>		Remind participants of their agreement to maintain confidentiality.



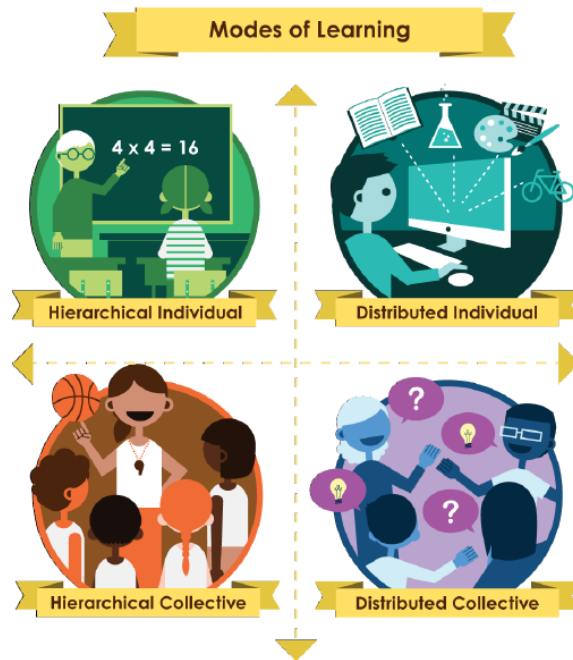
## APPENDIX D: SAMPLE PERSONAL REPORT

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for taking part in my research study! The Modes of Professional Learning Assessment you took for this study was adapted from Dr. Richard Elmore's (2014) Modes of Learning Framework. The purpose of the Modes of Learning Framework is to help organize points of view about learning into four quadrants as a way of developing one's personal theory of learning.

The horizontal axis of the matrix shows the continuum between hierarchical and distributed modes of learning. It addresses how learning is structured, sequenced, and organized, and by whom. The vertical axis displays the continuum between individual and collective learning. It answers whether learning is focused on the individual learner, or on learning as a social process.

Although the quadrants represent extreme versions of each point of view with inflexible boundaries, in reality most people move fluidly between the quadrants as informed by their own experiences and understandings. The graphic below shows each quadrant of the framework.



The following page contains personalized information about how you scored on the Modes of Learning Framework when considered through the lens of teacher professional learning. A brief description of each quadrant is also included.

Thanks again for taking part in this research study!

*Emily J. Ciment*

Modes of Learning Assessment  
Personal Report (Adapted from Richard Elmore (2014))

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Hierarchical Individual</u></b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Your Score: %</p> <p><b>Learning Goals</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Academic content is the most important thing that individuals learn</li> <li>● Academic learning can be measured and assessed.</li> </ul> <p><b>Responsibility for Learning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Individuals are responsible for success as learner</li> <li>● Authorities are accountable for measurable growth in individual learning.</li> </ul> <p><b>How Learning Happens</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Individual learning comes from the effort that individuals invest in their academic work.</li> <li>● Teachers provide the academic work and knowledge that learners must acquire.</li> </ul> <p><b>Social Structure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learners require strong guidance in order to learn.</li> <li>● Individuals who do well in learning settings deserve social and economic success.</li> </ul> <p><b>Defining Success</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Success is based on measurements of student learning</li> <li>● Standards and assessments represent society's agreement on what students should learn.</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Distributed Individual</u></b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Your Score:%</p> <p><b>Learning Goals</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learners learn for their own benefits, to develop knowledge and skills as they want.</li> </ul> <p><b>Responsibility for Learning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Individuals are responsible for what they learn, when they learn, and how they learn.</li> <li>● Individuals choose what to learn based on their values, interests, and aptitudes.</li> </ul> <p><b>How Learning Happens</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learning is an inherent biological imperative; people never stop learning.</li> <li>● Learners must make sense of competing and diverse sources of knowledge</li> </ul> <p><b>Social Structure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learning occurs through voluntary individual inquiry and social interaction.</li> <li>● Sources for learning are broadly distributed throughout society, including but not limited to formal and informal educational institutions</li> </ul> <p><b>Defining Success</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Success is determined by the individual learner, based on the learner's goals and ambitions.</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Hierarchical Collective</u></b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Your Score: %</p> <p><b>Learning Goals</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The values expressed in an institution's goals and rules represent community values.</li> <li>● Learners must acquire common values to become successful community members.</li> </ul> <p><b>Responsibility for Learning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learning comes from internalizing an institution's communal values and behaviors.</li> <li>● Institutional leaders must create a positive social environment for this learning.</li> </ul> <p><b>How Learning Happens</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learning comes from working respectfully and collaboratively with others.</li> <li>● Adults guide learners, and help them master how to work well in groups.</li> </ul> <p><b>Defining Success</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learners succeed when they participate productively and collaboratively in a community.</li> <li>● The social and cognitive skills essential to success are not easily measured.</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Distributed Collective</u></b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Your Score: %</p> <p><b>Learning Goals</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learners learn what is of interest to them and to members of their learning network.</li> <li>● By taking learning and teaching roles, individuals create and maintain a strong community</li> </ul> <p><b>Responsibility for Learning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Communal learning is directed by shared values, interests, and preferences.</li> <li>● Individuals choose to join or start a community based on personal and group learning goals.</li> </ul> <p><b>How Learning Happens</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learning is an inherent biological imperative; people never stop learning.</li> <li>● Learners acquire knowledge and also teach what they know to others.</li> <li>● Learners must make sense of competing and diverse sources of knowledge.</li> </ul> <p><b>Social Structure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learning occurs through social interactions and engagement with others.</li> <li>● Sources for learning are broadly distributed throughout society, and by learning and teaching others improves individual and communal</li> </ul>

	<p>abilities.</p> <p><b>Defining Success</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Success is determined by the learning community and its members.</li><li>• Individuals can access, learn from, and contribute meaningfully to various communities.</li></ul>
--	---