Teacher perceptions on professional study groups as an effective means to successful guided reading implementation

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TEACHER PERCEPTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL STUDY GROUPS AS AN EFFECTIVE MEANS TO SUCCESSFUL GUIDED READING IMPLEMENTATION

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

Melissa Kay Reimer
University of Northern Iowa
July 2006
ABSTRACT

This study examined teachers’ perceptions about the efficacy of study groups as a means to better prepare them for guided reading and incorporated comprehension strategy instruction. The questions this study addressed related to teacher perceptions about the effects of study group participation on teacher practice and student learning, as well as characteristics of effective study groups and obstacles hindering their effectiveness. The participants were eight elementary teachers who were voluntary members of a study group in their respective buildings, with the focus of guided reading and comprehension strategy instruction. Participant data was collected through individual and group interviews, self-assessments, study group observations, study group session feedback cards, and study group artifacts. Though the results are not generalizable, teachers in this study clearly indicated they believed study groups were a supportive and effective way to impact their teaching of guided reading and comprehension strategy instruction, and subsequently, student learning. Teachers also identified key characteristics and outcomes of effective study groups, as well as barriers that must be addressed. These findings acknowledge the importance of collaborative professional development opportunities and resulted in further questions that administrators and professional development facilitators must address if teachers are to effectively utilize study groups as a means for professional development.
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This study by: Melissa Kay Reimer

Entitled: TEACHER PERCEPTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL STUDY GROUPS AS AN EFFECTIVE MEANS TO SUCCESSFUL GUIDED READING IMPLEMENTATION

Has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the Degree of

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Professional development is at the heart of school and teacher improvement, and ultimately student learning. Professional development is the tool with which teachers’ growth should be fostered. Although varied attempts at developing teacher expertise and knowledge have taken place over the years, many of the efforts were lacking in rigor and relevance and subsequently brought about little change. As Elmore (1996) stated, “A significant body of circumstantial evidence points to a deep, systemic incapacity of U.S. schools, and the practitioners who work within them, to develop, incorporate, and extend new ideas about teaching and learning in anything but a small fraction of the schools and classrooms” (p.1). Due to the changing face of education, all schools must focus teachers...on the process of effective teaching and learning (Dearman & Alber, 2005, p. 635). As such, to maximize student learning, professional development must become the driving force of school and teacher improvement.

Statement of the Problem

Historically, teacher professional development may have included short doses of information presented via the transmission model (Richardson, 2003) with a one-size-fits-all approach (Petzko, 2004). Typically, this type of professional development allowed little to no collaboration, follow-up, active learning, or application to the classroom. Dearman and Alber (2005) highlighted Showers and Joyce’s (1996) assertion that stated, “Classroom application of innovative strategies is minimal because teachers do not have adequate time to study together” (p. 636). As a result, time spent supposedly
improving the quality of teachers minimally impacted the profession and, subsequently
teacher effectiveness and student learning. With an ever-so-present increased sense of
accountability in schools today, it becomes more imperative than ever to provide
professional development opportunities that effectively hone in on teacher quality and
effectiveness.

This needed shift in the way professional development is approached seems
reasonable based on the large body of research highlighting the tenets behind and
necessity for effective professional development. Darling-Hammond (1997) indicated
that educators and researchers know “professional development is important, because
good teaching is important” (p. 5). Hord (2005) suggested that if changes are sought
among teachers professionally, then, professional development must be done differently.
This means teachers must change what they know and how they do things. A
prerequisite to this change must be that teacher learning is facilitated differently.
Research indicated that professional development of teachers should: be long-term, with
follow-up to sustain initiatives; encourage collaboration and collegiality; build off teacher
beliefs and practices (Richardson, 2003); be tailored to individual and school needs
(Petzko, 2004); offer choice and feedback (Sweeney, 2003); and be reflective in nature
(Dearman & Alber, 2005).

Due to a history of limited professional development opportunities, some teachers
are ill-prepared for the instructional complexities that accompany teaching today.
Professional development has done them a disservice. For example, guided reading is
considered best practice in literacy education, with the goal being to improve student
reading by working with small homogeneous groups to incorporate strategies at their instructional level (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Guided reading has an array of logistical and content complexities which accompany it. Much support is needed for teachers implementing guided reading. However, many teachers lack the vision and rationale for such a model of teaching, are unsure of how to implement guided reading effectively, and have little organizational support to help with sustaining such initiatives (Sweeney, 2003).

Contemporary research supported the need for a different framework for professional development of teachers. Viable options are now emerging to assist teachers who are implementing new initiatives and working to improve their practice. Not only is there substantial research to support the need for improved teacher professional development and ways to best make that happen, but educators themselves are also taking matters into their own hands (Cramer, Hurst & Wilson, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Dearman & Alber, 2005; Howland & Picciotto, 2003; Joyce & Showers, 1996a; King, 2001; Kinnucan-Welsch, Rosemary, & Grogan, 2006; Petzko, 2004).

One option to transform teacher professional development and subsequent student learning includes the formation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which are communities of teachers who have a shared interest in “continuous inquiry and improvement” (Hord, 2004, p. 1). One type of PLC is the study group, which encourages collaborative inquiry and is organized and sustained by teachers based on common interest (Cramer, Hurst, & Wilson, 2003; Lick, 2000; Lyons & Pinnell, 2004; Murphy & Lick, 2005; Toll, 2005). In essence, a study group is an opportunity for colleagues with a
professional common interest or goal to meet regularly to study, discuss, and subsequently, implement educational changes.

Much research exists to support the idea of study groups as a means for effective professional development. However, what appeared to be overlooked by researchers, were the perceptions teachers actually held and the experiences they had related to study groups, as well as their subsequent impact on their teaching and student learning.

**Purpose**

This research examined teacher perceptions of their involvement in study groups as a professional development tool for better preparation of guided reading implementation in their classroom. Much research on study groups exists; however, the perceptions of those teachers involved appear to be overshadowed by the researcher’s perspectives themselves. Improvement in education will only be as strong as the improvement individual teachers make. Their willingness to grow professionally must be a top priority for those interested in truly improving education. To make educators a top priority and maximize their professional growth, we must seek their thoughts and input and understand their perceptions of effective professional development.

This study focused on perceptions held by eight classroom teachers who were members of one of two study groups studying guided reading and comprehension strategy incorporation. A qualitative study such as this can hope to touch upon aspects of study groups that may be of most benefit to teachers implementing a change in their literacy curriculum, such as guided reading. Through study of effective and collaborative
professional development, such as professional learning communities and study groups, the researcher gained insight into how teachers can best be supported during the process of implementation. The research questions guiding this study follow:

**Research Questions**

1. What did teachers believe were the effects of study group participation on their professional practice?

2. What did teachers believe were the effects of study group participation on their students' learning to read?

3. What characteristics did teachers believe comprised an effective study group?

4. What obstacles did teachers believe impeded the effectiveness of a study group?

**Limitations of the Study**

Several contextual factors associated with this research had an impact on data collection and are presented as limitations to this study. First, the level and type of researcher focus on Hayden and Southwood was dissimilar for a variety of reasons. While the Hayden study group met for a full school year, the Southwood group only met for five months and with less frequency. Due to this disparity, Southwood teachers may not have had the necessary amount of time to really incorporate new changes into their teaching. In comparison with Hayden, this limitation with time also impacted the amount and types of data collection that occurred. The district self-assessment was not administered in a timely fashion to the Southwood teachers, and thus, proved to be one less source of data. Also, the interviews of Southwood participants were fewer because
of the shorter time frame. Additionally, because of the researcher’s involvement as a passive observer in the Southwood study group, the researcher did not suggest feedback cards be used as a source of reflection for the study group.

A second potential limitation related to the researcher’s role as a facilitator of the Hayden study group. Because of working so closely with Hayden participants, personal relationships may have influenced the researcher’s perspective. Subjectivity in reporting and analyzing data may have been present. The researcher attempted to corroborate findings from the Hayden study group members with classroom teachers who were a part of different study groups not facilitated by the researcher. However, the researcher recognizes that interpretation began early in the data collection process as preconceived beliefs and perspectives were held. To increase the objectivity of the data analysis, triangulation of data was sought with a variety of data gathered from observation field notes and researcher reflections; participant interviews, feedback cards, self-assessments; and artifact analysis. Additionally, the District Language Arts Coordinator worked with the researcher to help decrease the presence of bias during the duration of the data collection and analysis process. Despite those efforts to decrease bias, perceptions were influenced by the data collection process and as such, should be considered perceptions, not facts.

Lastly, although participants from four schools were studied, generalizability of the findings should not be assumed. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) contended, the conclusions drawn by the researcher should be based on those situations, time periods, persons, contexts, and purposes for which the data are applicable.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Professional development is in the forefront for educators everywhere, as they consistently hear the message that more quality and well-prepared teachers are needed. Unfortunately, the professional development programs implemented in many districts don't succeed in improving the quality or preparedness of teachers. In the instance of guided reading, for example, a growing interest has emerged, but has left many educators wondering how best to successfully implement this thriving literacy practice into their classrooms. Like any instructional initiative or adoption, it becomes clear that teachers must be supported through the process if the transformation is to be lasting and effective. Implementation of any new literacy program, such as guided reading, requires change in thinking and practice (Dearman & Alber, 2005). To foster the evolution of guided reading in a teacher’s classroom, collaboration, support, and an array of professional development opportunities are necessary.

Through this literature review, the researcher synthesized research related to professional development, professional learning communities, and study groups. This review concluded that much research exists to support the use of study groups as an effective collaborative professional development tool in the guided reading implementation process.
Professional Development

Professional development opportunities are the vehicle through which teachers grow and expand their knowledge base and repertoire of instructional strategies. “Professional development is important because good teaching is important” (Sweeney, 2003, p. 10). Just as much research has been sought to determine the best practices in how children learn, much research has been conducted to determine how adults best learn. To maximize professional development, how adults best learn must be a key consideration.

Adult Learners

Contemporary research indicated that new knowledge must be learned more often through experience and collaboration than through transmission from the “expert” (Frey & Fisher, 2004; Kinnucan-Welsch et al., 2006; Rosemary, & Grogan, 2006; McLeskey & Waldron, 2004). Adults learn in much the same way children do; however, all too often, professional development is “reduced to pulling together hundreds of teachers to listen to an expert pontificate on a given subject” (Sweeney, 2003, p. 3). This approach is counter to the tenets of adult learning. Researchers such as Cramer et al. (1996) explained that “because teachers are at the heart of change and growth, it is imperative that they be actively involved in the change process by means of their own staff development programs” (p. 13). Knowles’ (1980) andragogy theory of adult learning indicated that adults were self-directed learners who were unique based upon their personal
experiences. Knowles indicated there was not one best way to design staff development programs, but applying adult learning theory could help increase effectiveness and relevance.

The staff development process is commensurate with the tenets of good teaching (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Sweeney (2003) made this point by outlining the key tenets that all learners need, regardless of age or experience: (1) a collaborative environment; (2) leadership opportunities; (3) choice related to professional development; (4) feedback; (5) access to resources; and (6) shared goals with anticipated outcomes.

Additionally, teachers need a model of professional development in which modeling and observation, guided practice, and supported independent practice are in abundance (Sweeney, 2003). Just as students thrive in small group-related work which fosters a community of learners, so do adults. Since research so clearly conveys the need for a community of learners, it becomes imperative that districts start to cater their professional development offerings in a manner in which research has shown to be effective.

Constructivist principles often apply to adult learners as well (Richardson, 2003). Two of the following features of social constructivism are hallmarks to quality professional development and specific to study groups. First, learning best occurs within a small group when they engage in discussion around common concerns (Kim, 2001). Vgotsky believed knowledge is actively constructed through social interaction of a shared experience (as cited in Rock & Wilson, 2005). Lyons and Pinnell (2004) concurred in saying that "Learning is a social process and more likely to occur when people with a
common concern share ideas, give advice, inquire, and solve problems together” (p. 4). As a result, knowledge and expertise are shared by all who are committed to learning about this topic (Kim, 2001). These shared experiences reflected upon and discussed together lend themselves to conceptual understanding (Berkley Teaching & Resource Center, 2006). As King (2001) suggested, knowledge is constructed in response to social interactions and through those interactions, negotiation, discourse, reflection, and explanation occur.

Second, adults are more poised to learn if they have a practical use for the knowledge and think it will benefit them (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). According to Kelleher (2003), professional development increases in effectiveness when it is embedded in teacher’s work. This implied that concepts covered should be relevant and relate to the context in which they would be applied (Kinnucan-Welsch et al., 2006). “In the right school context, learning is so deeply embedded in the daily work of educators that it is difficult to distinguish between where the work ends and the learning begins” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 273).

Effective Professional Development

Guided reading is an example of the need for teachers to have ample professional opportunities to learn and apply that learning in the context of their teaching. As a result, “a strong need exists for teachers to experience sustained, high-quality professional development in order to improve student learning and teacher instruction” (Rock & Wilson, 2005, p. 77). Just as education, teachers, and students are evolving, so too must professional development. Through the evolution, professional learning
communities are replacing the traditional tale of in-services and one-shot doses of training. Lefever-Davis, Wilson, and Moore (2003, p. 784) described,

As a new vision of professional development spreads... repeated themes are being advanced, which often are addressed successfully through teacher study groups. Teacher learning thrives when professional development opportunities are focused on inquiry and problem solving; are based on the needs of teachers, learners, and schools; support lifelong learning for educators; acknowledge the professionalism of the educators; provide for safe practice, feedback, coaching, and reflection; are linked to student achievement; and are job related.

Recent research suggested that teacher knowledge and commitment to school change was a prerequisite for successful implementation (Frey & Fisher, 2004).

“Professional development is about change- change in what you know and believe about teaching and learning and what you can do in the classroom” (Regional Educational Laboratory, 2000). Change comes from reexamining educational beliefs and assumptions that guide behavior (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). Because change is so personal, teachers need time to reflect on beliefs and practices (Cramer et al., 1996; Dearman & Alber, 2005) and as a result, make transformative decisions that impact student learning.


It is an assumption that a teacher’s knowledge and beliefs are important determinants of their actions in the classroom (Meijer, Verloop, & Beijaard, 2001; Routman, 2002). As such, substantive professional development is essential for forward movement and successful implementation of guided reading. Meaningful and relevant
professional development, coupled with the opportunity for interaction with colleagues as innovations are being implemented is essential for success (McLeskey & Waldron, 2004). Teachers need more than an occasional in-service where a lack of continuity is present. Much of the staff development conducted derived from the short-term transmission model (Richardson, 2003). These experiences tend to be passive in nature, with large quantities of information presented to them, and where little time is allotted for discussion or collaboration (Rock & Wilson, 2005). Furthermore, teachers shouldn’t be expected to base student learning gains upon one professional development experience (Richardson, 2003; Sweeney, 2003).

Joyce and Showers’ (1995) research demonstrated professional development that included the following components of the gradual release model were most effective in sustaining change. The four tenets behind Joyce and Shower’s professional development model included (1) theory, (2) demonstration, (3) initial and guided practice, and (4) coaching. The theory component represented the information about the new skill and described the skill and the rationale for its use. Secondly, demonstration included a “visual picture of high-quality instruction” (Sweeney, 2003, p. 4) by modeling of the new strategy with the teacher being a passive observer through use of observations of expert teachers, videos, and professional readings. The third component was initial practice in a context in which much support is provided, with a coach alongside (Joyce & Showers, 1995). This in turn led to guided practice in the classroom context, with such things as follow-up peer observations, study group sessions, examining student work, and making
a plan for subsequent instruction (Sweeney, 2003). The gradual release model in Figure 1 highlights the degree to which teacher independence becomes commensurate with responsibility through time.

![Gradual Release Model](image)

*Figure 1. Gradual Release Model. (Sweeney, 2003, p. 5, adapted from Pearson & Gallagher, 1983).*

The last component is coaching. Coaching is the process of guiding teachers toward increased and more effective implementation of a practice with teachers receiving
hands-on support and instruction (Slack, 2003). Research showed that “teachers who had a coaching relationship—that is, who shared aspects of teaching, planned together, and pooled their experiences—practiced new skills and strategies more frequently and applied them more appropriately than did their counterparts who worked alone to expand their repertoires” (Joyce & Showers, 1996a, p.13). Furthermore, Joyce and Showers demonstrated through their research that “ninety percent will transfer a new skill into use if theory, demonstration, practice, feedback and ongoing coaching are provided as elements of the professional development program” (Galbo, 1998).

The U.S. Department of Education (1995) has published standards of professional development that could be addressed through the use of PLCs. These standards included:

- The teacher’s focus should be central to student learning.
- Current and relevant research should be explored.
- Continuous inquiry should be promoted.
- Collaboration should be fostered.
- Coaching and ongoing support over time must be provided.
- Reflection, self-evaluation, and meaningful dialogue should take place.

Most notable however to the Department’s recommendations, was that learning through professional development should be relevant and job-embedded. According to O’Neil (1995),

Learning is always an on-the-job phenomenon. Learning always occurs in the context of where you are taking action. So, we need to find ways to get teachers working together; we need to create an environment where they can continually reflect on what they are doing and learn more and more what it takes to work as [a] team (p.274).
Sweeney identified three phases of professional development. Initially, the vision must be defined so teachers understand what effective instruction is and how it looks in the classroom. Through this phase an emphasis on the theory and rationale for the instructional strategy was presented. Teachers also had opportunities to observe and start collaborative planning and involvement in study groups. In the second phase of implementation, in-class coaching, further observations, and research study continued. The focus of this phase lies in how to best incorporate the instructional strategy into the classroom. The third phase, sustainment, involved ongoing support and direction to continue teacher growth and foster change. Small group support, such as study groups were an effective means to sustain an instructional change. Shared training provided mutual understandings that fostered future professional development and collaboration (Miles, Stegle, Hubbs, Henk, & Mallette, 2004).

Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon’s (2001) research indicated that effective professional development has three core features, including content knowledge focus; active learning opportunities; and coherence. Professional development should be a part of a comprehensive change initiative which incorporates experiences that are consistent with teacher goals, alignment with state standards, and includes collaboration among teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Kinnucan-Welsch, et al., 2006). As Darling and Hammond (2003) stated, “Teachers learn best by studying, doing, and reflecting; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see” (as cited in Rock & Wilson). Richardson (2003) corroborated Morrow and Casey’s (2004) findings that teachers listed the following as an impetus to change their instructional practices:
individual goal setting; collaboration; coaching; ample time; access to materials; study group involvement; and observing other teachers. Many of the prerequisites noted by Morrow and Casey are addressed through the development of professional learning communities.

A Community of Learners- Professional Learning Communities

To meet the professional development needs of diverse educators, professional learning communities (PLCs) are evolving in schools. Morrissey (2000) defined PLCs as “a group that operates together to engage a group of professionals in coming together for learning within a supportive, self-created community” (p.10). Furthermore, Barth (1990) described PLCs as “a place where students and adults alike are engaged as active learners in matters of special importance to them and where everyone is thereby encouraging everyone else’s learning” (as cited in Roberts and Pruitt, 2003, p.6)

Characteristics

Chief hallmarks of PLCs included a collaborative environment with a student learning focus (Hord, 2005; Martin-Kniep, 2004; Roberts & Pruitt). Also present in PLCs were leadership opportunities, choice in professional development, feedback through observation and follow-up, ample access to resources, and shared goals and anticipated outcomes (Hord, 2005; Kinnucan-Welsch et al., 2006; Shellard, 2004; Sweeney, 2003). All learning communities should be collaborative in nature (Dearman & Alber, 2005; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003), engage in inquiry (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Shellard, 2004), be ongoing, transforming, and involvement should be leading to student learning (Sweeney, 2003). “When teachers...collaborate
and resolve issues around what content to teach and how to best teach it, they are searching for a common understanding of what effective teaching looks like for all children” (Roberts & Pruitt, p. 10).

Hord (2005) described five dimensions of PLCs which help overcome barriers that hamper reform. First, they have supportive shared leadership. Roberts and Pruitt (2003) concurred that teacher leadership is essential to improvement. Second, as Darling-Hammond (1999) corroborated, collective learning of teachers impacts student learning. Third, shared vision and a set of values leads to student learning being the focus. Kinnucan-Welsch et al., (2006) concurred that professional development must align with what students do and know. Fourth, supportive conditions must be in place for a community of learning to exist, such as time and personal trust. Lastly, shared personal practice with observation and feedback is necessary. Despite the commonalities among all PLCs, they can fill different purposes. For example, they may be various sizes of groups, with a formal or loose structure, and have varied focuses.

Outcomes

PLCs engage teachers in a variety of activities centered on teaching and learning that have many associated benefits (Martin-Kniep, 2004). Teachers involved in PLCs evolved as professionals and were seen as colleagues, leaders, learners, and pedagogues. PLCs led to increased and ongoing collaboration and improve pedagogy (Shellard, 2003). Because of joint inquiry, teacher’s insights grew, as did solutions to problems.
PLCs offer support and camaraderie that help teachers through the learning curve. Teachers who are involved don’t want to settle for the status quo; ongoing improvement is the goal (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Shellard (2003) highlighted three benefits of PLCs. On the macro level, school improvement efforts may be enhanced due to collaboration, shared vision, and collective inquiry. Through PLCs, a shared vision emerges, action is fostered, and teachers are encouraged to grow (Martin-Kniep, 2004). PLCs become the impetus for growth and change within an organization due to the priority of shared learning. Teachers believed through PLCs, systematic school-wide change is possible.

Secondly, teacher development is enhanced. Teachers reported feeling less isolated from colleagues. Because the isolation is broken, collaboration and reflection are fostered (Martin-Kniep, 2004; Shellard, 2004). PLCs also improved confidence in their abilities, and increased the likelihood of experimentation and analysis of their teaching, which then led to improved practices. Teachers reported they had increased commitment to education with an expanded knowledge base and felt professionally renewed.

Lastly, because of cultural norms that accompany PLCs, and a sense of collective responsibility for all learners, student learning increased. Hord (2005) highlighted a domino effect of PLCs. Teachers who worked together changed pedagogical tactics. They then became collectively responsible for the growth of students. As a result, students were more engaged, which then increased academic achievement and lessened the achievement gap.
Study Groups

One type of PLC that encourages collaborative inquiry is a study group. Study groups are collaborative groups organized and sustained by teachers based on common interest, with the specific intention to learn more about a self-selected topic (Cramer et al., 1996; Lick, 2003; Lyons & Pinnell, 2004; Murphy & Lick, 2005; & Toll, 2005). While there are many kinds of study groups, the focus of this research is teacher-initiated and directed groups. This type of study group engaged teachers as learners within their own classroom (Rock & Wilson, 2005) and was a vehicle for effective learning to occur.

Tichenor and Heins (2000) identified three purposes of study groups: to implement curricular and instructional innovations; to foster collaborative planning; and to guide study of current relevant research. Through their collaborative inquiry and dialogue, the group members had a common goal as they worked toward their own individual goals (Birchak et al., 1998; Cramer et al., 1996; Lyons & Pinnell, 2004). Study groups were grounded in inquiry, reflection, experimentation (Florio-Ruane & Raphael, 2001; Lick, 2000; Murphy & Lick, 2005), and discovery (Sweeney, 2003), as well as focused on both theory and practice (Cramer et al., 1996; Kinnucan et al., 2006). Study groups focused the attention of those involved on imperative changes that were needed to improve instruction. They were a venue for challenging thinking on a status quo level (Birchak et al., 1998). Lefever-Davis et al., (2003) concurred that study groups “invariably result in a change in teacher behavior” (p. 782).
Characteristics

Study groups are collaborative in nature, allowing for peer knowledge and expertise to be shared (Cramer et al., 1996; Lyons & Pinnell, 2004). An inquiry model of collaborative learning assumes that teachers are experts with experience and are inclined to study their instructional practice (King, 2001; Rock & Wilson, 2005). Study group involvement led to participants examining their practice, student learning, personal goals, and achievements in an ongoing manner (Richardson, 2003). They were an evolving professional development support that existed to meet the needs of the members (Birchak et al., 1998). Study groups were a venue for exchanging ideas and voicing beliefs and concerns (Florio-Ruane & Raphael, 2004), which fostered teachers learning together (Taylor et al., 2002).

Study groups have several strengths that appeal to and positively influence members. A most notable strength of study groups is that they are voluntary in nature (Birchak et al., 1998; Cramer et al., 1996; Lyons & Pinnell, 2004; Murphy & Lick, 2005; Sweeney, 2003; Tichenor & Heins, 2000). Through voluntary membership, teachers were empowered and felt a sense of autonomy, which led to increased commitment and sustainability (Roberts, 2005). It is worthwhile to note that although study group membership is voluntary and based on teacher interest, they can also be a gateway to curriculum reform (Birchak et al., 1998; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003).

Relevance is another strength leading to group effectiveness, as the theory and research studied tied closely into teachers' practice (Birchak, et al., 1998; Dearman & Alber, 2005; Lefever-Davis et al., 2003; Lick, 2000; Murphy & Lick, 2005; Richardson,
2003; Roberts, 2005). Howland and Picciotto (2003) agreed with Tobin and LaMaster (1992) who said, “Teachers should be involved in observing their own teaching, observing colleagues teach, reflecting on practice, and discussing, analyzing, and interpreting data from classrooms” (p.13). With study groups as a vehicle, teachers applied new learnings appropriately and transferred the knowledge into practice.

Relevant activities teachers may chose to engage in were professional readings, analyzing their teaching, examining student work and behavior, problem solving, or doing a combination of the above (Lyons & Pinnell, 2004; Roberts & Pruitt, 2005).

Study groups offered great support and a sense of connectedness between individuals (Roberts & Pruitt, 2005; Sweeney, 2003), especially during the implementation phase of instructional practices (Cramer et al., 1996). Study groups enabled teachers to break free of the isolation that usually accompanies teaching (Florio-Ruane & Raphael, 2001; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). Study groups brought together individuals who might normally not have opportunities to collaborate. As a result, collegiality and a sense of professionalism developed, which increased and improved communications (Birchak et al., 1998). This thereby increased the cohesiveness of faculty and a community of learners was established as teachers collaborated through study groups (Cramer et al., 1996).

Study groups set a common goal and regularly assessed their progress toward the goal (Lyons & Pinnell, 2004). Each member made a commitment to be an active
member of the group. Teachers focused an inquiry on anything they considered to be vital to improved instruction and student learning (Tichenor & Heins, 2000). As Lick (2000) stated,

The content educators must have (e.g., skills, knowledge, abilities, and attitudes) is important to the study group process, as are what they investigate, study, and do to be more successful with their students. For enhanced student performance, teachers must alter academic content and modify instructional strategies (p. 45).

Reflection

To regularly assess and modify one’s practice and enhance student performance, a cycle of reflection is needed. Merriam-Webster (1998) defined reflection as “a thought, idea, or opinion formed as a result of meditation” (p.1542). Additionally, reflection is defined as “consideration of some subject matter, idea, or purpose” (Merriam-Webster, p. 1542). Through meditation and consideration in teaching, examining beliefs, critically looking at one’s teaching, and bridging theory and practice occurred (King, 2001). Through reflection, teachers polished “their repertoires of knowledge and skill throughout their careers by reflecting on their practice and studying the knowledge of the profession in the company of their colleagues” (Joyce & Showers, 1996b), leading to change and growth (Petzko, 2004). As the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (2005) standard # 9 stated, “The teacher is a reflective practitioner who continually evaluates the effects of his/her choices and actions on others…and actively seeks out opportunities to grow professionally” (p. 31).

Reflection is cyclical and ongoing in nature and allows for an instructional practice to be examined collaboratively. Once the instructional practice is identified and
explained, dialogue about the practice begins. After reflecting, teachers can carry out a pre-determined set of actions relating to the teaching practice. Upon completion, they assessed the outcome and further reflection took place (Sweeney, 2003). Petzko (2004) believed this cycle of reflective action forced individuals to “critique the assumptions upon which action was taken, challenge those assumptions, evaluate the action taken as well as its results, and design alternatives” (p. 19).

Research suggested that reflective practice supported change, fostered professional growth, and enhanced school reform (Petzko, 2004; Taylor et al., 2002). Reflection was a key element to professional growth, change, and sustainment of new learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Tichenor & Heins, 2000). Group productivity increased as members reflected and self-monitored (Garmston, 2005). Reflective dialogue was necessary (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) and allowed teachers to converse about issues and problems regarding students, learning, and teaching (Richardson, 2003; Shellard, 2004). Roberts advocated reflection on readings, curriculum issues, classroom observations, and discussions, while Dearman & Alber (2005) advocated reflection of student work and the context in which it occurred. Regardless of the focus, study groups were a venue for reflection and exploring complex ideas and doing so from diverse perspectives (Florio-Ruane & Raphael, 2001).

Collaboration

At the heart of study groups is collaboration (Wheelock, 2000). Collaboration is a “vehicle for achieving shared goals” (Friend, 2000), where “rigorous mutual examination of teaching and learning” occurred (Inger, 1993) in the context of professional inquiry
(Dearman & Alber, 2005). Howland and Picciotto (2003) suggested collaboration was constituted by two or more teachers who met regularly to concern themselves with the details of teaching and learning.

Wheelan identified many perceived positive outcomes of teacher collaboration. As a result of collaboration, teachers tested ideas and expanded expertise (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Through this collaborative inquiry, teachers reported having increased confidence which impacted their student’s learning (Dearman & Alber, 2005). Schools that were more collegial and collaborative were happier places, which led to higher student achievement (Routman, 2003).

Teachers believed they have a more positive influence on peer’s attitudes and behaviors. Enthusiasm and motivation came from teachers who feel they have bought into something voluntarily that they helped create. As a result of formal collaboration, teachers were more likely to engage in professional conversations outside of the designated professional development times (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003) and increased their reflectivity (Shellard, 2004). Shellard corroborated research by Cramer et al., (1996) and DuFour and Eaker (1998) that supported the notion that through collaboration, teachers experienced the interactions with others that fostered new ideas and provided them the avenue to take risks.

Research showed that teacher beliefs changed as collaboration continued. According to Showers and Joyce (1996), teachers felt planning through collaboration decreased their workload; engaging in conversation took time, but was beneficial;
understanding was better promoted through research study in the context of their teaching; and discussing and examining student work encouraged instructional modifications.

Conversation was the building block from which collaboration flourished. Through conversations in the study group, support, advice, sense-making, and encouragement evolved. Theoretical and practical understandings grew from involvement in collaborative conversations (Birchak et al., 1998). Florio-Ruane & Raphael (2001) found that authentic conversation led to a clearer understanding and better articulation of beliefs, an appreciation of alternative perspectives, relational connections, a reaffirmation to ideals and large-scale educational commitments, the increased ability to develop instructional techniques, and a better model for engaging students in learning conversations. Thoughtfulness in expression and tolerance were also positive outcomes of richer conversation. Like any aspect of relationships, conversation was bred only with confidence, trust, and safety (Florio-Ruane & Raphael, 2001).

Additionally, a “teacher’s conversation about their teaching sets the stage for students to talk about their work as well” (Wheelock, 2000, p.5).

Study Group Outcomes

Many benefits existed for members of study groups. “Teacher study groups have the power to support change in today’s classrooms” (Lefever-Davis et al., 2003, p. 784). Study groups were a venue for articulating understandings as well as challenging long-held beliefs. Research by Birchak et al., (1998) showed that the time teachers invest in study groups was more productive than traditional professional development, teachers made
greater gains, and were more motivated to change. Study group involvement also led to other kinds of collaboration outside the confines of the study group.

Study group involvement may also be tied directly or indirectly to school-wide change. Teachers have a choice to sit back and let the trends become pervasive, or take action and shape their own future as educators (Sugar & Warren, 2003). Those involved with study groups had an understanding that they were at liberty to take their professional development matters into their own hands, rather than sit back. The value of study groups was that they were not entirely dependent upon organizational support to be effective (Murphy & Lick, 2005). Study groups have the rare ability to survive trends, shifts in district policies, and administrative hoops because they were not dependent on external agencies. Additionally, study groups do not “assume the responsibility for implementing the vision of remote, uninvested parties” (Birchak et al., 1998, p.143). A sense of synergy emerged, with the realization that people working together created more growth in effect than individuals working alone (Lick, 2000).

Through study groups, teachers developed an inner-confidence, motivation, and sense of competence (Shellar, 2003), as well as an increased sense of personal dignity (Murphy & Lick, 2005). Research demonstrated that through involvement with study groups, teachers increased their leadership capabilities (Cramer et al., 1996; Florio-Ruane & Raphael, 2001) and took risks by “going public” with teaching strategies (Inger, 1993; Wheelock, 2000). They become more “effective, efficient, and expert” (Lyons & Pinnell, 2004) and got “smarter together” (Inger, 1993). As such, they continue to pursue personal and professional learning agendas that impacted professionals around them.
(Cramer et al., 1996). Rock and Wilson’s (2005) findings corroborated the above research and indicated teachers believed their professional growth resulted from support that was sustained and on-going, involved research, collaboration, active learning, observation, and focused reflection and discussion.

**Barriers**

Although significant benefits appeared to come from study groups, some obstacles stifled the progress of individuals and groups. Dearman and Alber’s (2005) research, along with Sweeney’s (2003), indicated it becomes evident that teachers rejected new knowledge and skill when they were imposed, when they were a part of overwhelming innovations, when teachers were not a part of the decision making, or when pre-packaged, one-shot in-services were offered. Fortunately, “[professional] learning communities mitigate these conditions” (Sweeney, 2003, p. 12). Within a case-study by Morrow and Casey (2004), a seasoned teacher revealed her thoughts on change in literacy instruction as it related to mandatory professional development: “I never would have accomplished anything if the administration and project staff came in and ‘told’ me what to do. Being able to set my own goals made me want to try, because I felt like I was the one in control” (p. 668).

This anecdote illustrated the desire by teaching professionals for autonomy and self-determination, elements that played a key role in the change process. Study groups should not be used as a tool for coercing teachers into learning. Mandates only led to increased resistance, resentment, and defensiveness (Birchak et al., 1998). Research
suggested that teacher knowledge and commitment to school change was a prerequisite for successful implementation (Frey & Fisher, 2004).

“Collegiality has… much to do with teachers’ personal qualities” (Wheelock, 2004, p.5). Differing personalities and diversity in members, led to an additional set of challenges that impeded effectiveness (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). Because individual teachers responded differently to collaboration, differences among teachers were exposed and different learning outcomes occurred (Brownell, Adams, Sindelar, Waldron, & VanHover, 2006). Although some teachers voluntarily joined the study group, they didn’t grow comfortable collaborating with others and still preferred to work alone. Moreover, some members were resistant to change, despite the willingness to be a member of a group. Also, personality conflicts occasionally emerged from personal or professional issues as comfort in the group grew (Birchak et al., 1998). However, study groups may be an effective means to work through these very same conflicts and differences. Additionally, members of the group who were dominant or silent adversely impacted the discourse of the group and hampered individual growth. Furthermore, some teachers did not know how to work with others or how to work through disagreements (Lick, 2000; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Wheelan, 2005). Some teachers also feared criticism, or at the very least, speaking frankly about their own beliefs, struggles, or observations (Murphy & Lick, 2005).

New memberships in an established study group created a variety of challenges. Birchak et al., (1998) believed the dynamics of the group changed when new members were introduced. Re-establishment of the community was essential to ensure progress
was not stifled. Some new members also had a different vision for the group, as well as individual goals that did not mesh with that of others in the group. Because of their belated membership, the new member required prior conversation to be rehashed.

Birchak et al. (1998) also brought to the forefront the question of a principal’s involvement in this type of group. Research indicated there were benefits to principal involvement in study groups. Proponents of principal involvement believed the group is legitimized by the attendance of the principal. Additionally, the principal gained awareness of teacher and school needs directly, while at the same time, showed support for teacher initiatives. However, some teachers involved in study groups suggested that an evaluative aspect accompanied presence of an administrator, therefore limiting the openness and perceived emotional safety of the group.

One of the key elements of effective study groups is the focus on theory, the rationale behind the practice that guided teachers. “Theory provide[d] an essential rationale for answering why something should be initiated” (Rock & Wilson, 2005, p. 78). “‘The rub between theory and practice’ occurs most productively when questions arise in the context of real students and work in progress” (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p.7). However, some members were leary of this type of focus, because self-perceptions led them to believe they lacked key knowledge or didn’t view themselves as “theoretical” (Birchak et al., 1998, p.26). Some members just wanted to cut to the chase of the practical side of instruction. Despite the unfamiliarity that came with delving into research, Rock and Wilson (2005) found that teachers who integrated theory, felt it was a natural link to their own instructional inquiry.
Marin-Kniep (2004) demonstrated that logistical considerations for study groups were many. Without the proper conditions, study groups weren’t able to flourish. Study group members needed to be ready to make collective decisions in the best of interest of the members. The most common logistical concern was time, which often needed much negotiation. Of concern to members were time to meet collectively and collaborate; time to observe other teachers; and time to implement new practices and evaluate them. Additional concerns centered on group size, meeting place, frequency of meetings, topics, procedures, leadership roles, and materials. Through identification and negotiation of these logistical barriers, teacher development and subsequently student learning became an increased focus.

**Student Learning**

The efficacy of professional development, and more specifically, study groups, can only be evaluated in terms of its relationship to student learning (Hord & Cowan, 1999). “Ultimately, the bottom line for effective professional development is improved student achievement” (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003, p. 53). Collaboration of this nature is linked to achievement gains because of more powerful lessons (Shellard, 2004), increased sharing of ideas, better quality solution to problems, increased teacher confidence, and improved methods and materials (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Garmston, 2005).

Educators must examine their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors as a means to improve student learning. Cramer et al., (1996) contended that when teachers change, so do their students. Essentially, improvement resulted from practice being examined and
doing things differently. This in turn meant changing what and how things were done, which required teachers to learn to do things differently (Hord & Cowan, 1999).

According to Lyons and Pinnell (2004), those teachers who engaged in collaborative literacy-based professional development had students who became better readers and writers.

One of the chief reasons educators were persistent in the quest for new knowledge and instructional strategies was to ultimately impact student learning. “Enhanced student learning and school improvement require that schools and teachers proactively manage the natural resistance to change common to people and long-standing educational, organizational, and sociocultural systems” (Lick, 2000, p. 45). Inger (1993) corroborated Tichenor and Heins’ (2000) research which indicated that study groups contributed significantly to achievement of school goals, and ultimately, student learning.

Although there were a host of variables that contributed to or detracted from student learning, successful educators were sure their professional development inquiries, studies, collaboration opportunities, and purposeful conversations led to higher student achievement. Simply having involvement in a study group did not increase the likelihood of improved student learning. How teachers used the study group time and what was done made a deeper impact (Lyons & Pinnell, 2004). Murphy and Lick (2005) contended that the collegiality and sense of empowerment teachers experienced as a result of study groups, led to increased student learning. “Teacher study groups can be a vital component of school improvement by offering a viable bridge from information sharing to practical application at the hands of empowered teachers. As teachers learn and grow,
the results can be seen in the classroom” (Cramer et al., 1996, p.16). Teachers who worked together have students who learned more, behaved better, increased their test scores, and had increased parent involvement. Hord (2005) believed teachers who continuously sought and shared learning, acted on what they learned and applied to that to best practices. A best practice in literacy education that has proven to require a great deal of professional support is guided reading.

**Guided Reading**

With student learning at the forefront steering professional development, it is imperative to understand just how a literacy method like guided reading can really impact student learning, as well as the complexity of factors that impact implementation of it in a classroom. Guided reading is a small-group learning method built around student’s instructional levels and individual needs. In essence, guided reading allows opportunities for students to talk, think, and question their way through a text in a social context (Nations & Alonso, 2001) and helps students expand their independent reading strategies (Lyons & Pinnell, 2004). Fountas and Pinnell (1996), along with Reutzel (1996), believe the main purpose of guided reading is to promote independence by helping children develop reading skills and strategies, fluency, and confidence.

Guided reading instruction, materials, and teacher decisions change over time as children develop increased knowledge, skill, and independence (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). By recognizing that these categories are not discrete stages, but rather part of a developing continuum of learning that readers must go through, a rationale is provided for flexible and dynamic grouping. Guided reading groups are meant to be dynamic,
Although students with similar needs working toward strategy internalization at an independent level. Research suggests that implementing changing and heterogeneous groups has contributed to growth in achievement (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Slavin, 1987).

Through guided reading, explicit instruction is balanced with scaffolded and independent practice of strategies. The instructional decisions made during guided reading are based on ongoing assessments of students' strengths and needs. Because children come to the reading table with various literacy experiences and knowledge, they do not necessarily have the fortitude to actively extend their knowledge into independent reading with active strategy use. The teacher acts as a mediator to help readers process the information by building on their current knowledge and experience. The teacher chooses a “just right” text that is appropriately challenging and guides them in the development of effective reading comprehension and word solving strategies. (Lyons & Pinnell, 2004; Nations & Alonso, 2001). Through guided reading, readers build their strategy base and flexibility of use, so that it may later be applied to independent reading. Strategies to address word solving, fluency, and comprehension must all be taught.

Throughout the lesson, the primary role of a guided reading teacher is as a facilitator who observes reading behavior, gathers evidence, makes decisions, groups and regroups children, selects books, introduces texts, supports reading, and manages learning activities (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). It is the responsibility of the teacher to provide the needed support and guidance for students reading challenging texts through strategy introduction and reinforcement.
As a result of the responsive teaching that is needed, a sound theoretical and practical base of knowledge is needed to better prepare teachers. Research reflected that guided reading is considered best practice in literacy education (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Considering the instructional and logistical complexities that accompany guided reading, much professional development has been and is still needed for teachers to successfully implement guided reading in their classroom.

**Application to Present Study**

Guided reading is as specific as it is broad, and all of the areas described above indicated the necessity of solid professional development to put guided reading into practice (Taylor et al., 2002). Successful implementation of guided reading requires a clear understanding of the tenets behind this foundational reading element. Also needed, however, are a strong professional community, collaboration, time, and resources to support change, teacher support, and a vision of student learning as the driving force (Booth & Roswell, 2002). With all of the complexities and responsibilities for this one element of the balanced literacy program, teachers need support from their colleagues. Study groups may be an effective and relevant way to meet the professional development needs of teachers implementing guided reading.

Much research on study groups exists; however, the perceptions of those teachers involved appeared to be overshadowed by the researcher's perspectives themselves. Using qualitative research, the researcher hopes to further explore teacher perceptions about the efficacy of study groups as a professional development tool for guided reading implementation.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this study, I examined teacher perceptions of their involvement in study groups as a professional development tool for preparation of guided reading implementation in their classroom. My interest in this study came as a result of being directly involved as a study group facilitator at Hayden Elementary. Subsequently, I developed an interest in how other schools within the district were implementing study groups and the perceptions of those teachers involved.

The research questions addressed were:

1. What did teachers believe were the effects of study group participation on their professional practice?

2. What did teachers believe were the effects of study group participation on their students’ learning to read?

3. What characteristics did teachers believe comprised an effective study group?

4. What obstacles did teachers believe impeded the effectiveness of a study group?

Qualitative Design

A qualitative design was selected to be the most appropriate research approach for this study due to the nature of the research questions and the intent of the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the study group process and teacher perceptions related
to it (Patton, 1990). Data sources included field notes from observations of study groups, participant interviews, participant self-assessments, participant feedback cards, and researcher reflection data (Patton, 1990).

The protocols from the Human Subjects Review board at the University of Northern Iowa were followed when obtaining consents to participate from teachers involved in the study. The informed consents and questionnaires were submitted to the review board and approved for use in this study.

Context

The research took place at two of six elementary schools in a mid-sized, upper-middle class school district in the mid-western region of the United States. Both Hayden elementary and Southwood Elementary have three sections of each grade level, from Kindergarten through sixth grade. Both elementary schools involved in the study were chosen based on the familiarity of the researcher with the staff at the buildings.

At the time of the study, the district was working toward guided reading implementation in all kindergarten through sixth grade classrooms. Despite their recent attempts to bring teachers on board, many teachers felt they were still ill-prepared and were reluctant to teach guided reading and incorporate comprehension strategy instruction.

School-level study groups emerged as one way to support new teachers or those still unfamiliar with guided reading and the incorporation of comprehension strategies. The Hayden study group emerged at the onset of the school year at the request of the building leadership team to offer support to first year teachers and teachers still
unfamiliar or uncomfortable with guided reading and comprehension strategies. The members of the study group met through the entire school year. Both guided reading and comprehension strategies were part of the Hayden Elementary school improvement plan. I was the facilitator of the Hayden Elementary study group.

The Southwood study group emerged due to the initiative of teacher leaders in their building who had attended a District professional development seminar focusing on comprehension strategy incorporation into the literacy curriculum, with a particular emphasis on guided reading. As a result, the District Language Arts Coordinator facilitated the group at the request of the Southwood teachers. The Southwood study group members met for five months. I was involved at Southwood as a passive participant.

Both study groups were teacher initiated and voluntarily attended. The participation of the teachers in the study group went beyond the scope of their regular teaching duties. Membership in both study groups steadily increased as teachers became more aware of the district’s long-term professional development goals. The research was conducted over a period of one school year.

Participants

Throughout the study, participants at Hayden were actively involved in study groups on their own accord. The participants in this study were chosen to be a part of the research based on active membership in their study groups from the onset and their willingness to participate in the study. Six classroom teachers from Hayden were a part of a year-long study group, three of whom took part in this study. The three who took part, were involved in the study group through the duration of the school year, while the
other three joined mid-way in the year. Five elementary classroom teachers from Southwood, all of whom chose to participate in this study, were part of a study group in their building that ran for five months during the school year.

The total number of primary participants in the study groups was eight. The three Hayden teachers were interviewed three times individually and as part of a group interview at the end of the year. The Southwood teachers were interviewed one time individually and as part of a group interview at the end of the year. Participation in the research was voluntarily, as being involved in the study group did not require participation in the research. Participant data, including the number of participants who were involved in the study groups and individual and group interviews, is provided in Table 1.

Table 1.
*Participant Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Duration of Study Group</th>
<th>Number of Participants in Study Group</th>
<th>Number of Study Group Participants Agreed to be Individually Interviewed</th>
<th>Number of Study Group Participants Agreed to Group Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hayden</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwood</td>
<td>5 months</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
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</table>
An informed consent explaining the details of their involvement in the research was provided for participants. Their decision to participate had no bearing on their work, participation in the study group, or in a professional relationship with the researcher. The informed consent is provided in Appendix A.

**Design Framework**

This study was phenomenological in nature, in that it focused on descriptions of what group members experienced through participation in study groups and how they experienced it (Patton, 1990). As Marshall & Rossman (1980) described, researchers can’t understand human behavior without understanding the context within which participants interpret their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Through naturalistic inquiry the research focused on the real-world settings of study groups as they unfold naturally, with no controls being placed in the research (Key, 1997). It was my intention to conduct research that would contribute to the fundamental knowledge base related to teacher perceptions on professional development, by adequately describing and understanding teacher experiences within study groups and how those experiences lent themselves to competence and preparation for guided reading. This design framework best provided a holistic description (Key, 1997) of teacher perceptions about the effectiveness of study groups and provided research needed to address the formal research questions posed in Chapter I.
Data Collection

Various methods of data collection were used to address the research questions. Observational, interview, and self-assessment data were compared and analyzed. Participant’s statements from interviews and self-assessments were compared with their statements during study groups and group interviews. Consistency of what people said over time at different intervals was analyzed. Additionally, perspectives of members from both study groups and their subsequent level of involvement were compared. Also, consideration for difference in perspectives of new teachers versus seasoned teachers was explored. The researcher established credibility (Lincoln& Guba, 1985) through varied field experiences with both study groups as well as engaging participants in semi-structured individual and group interviews.

Through observations, interviews, feedback cards, self-assessments, and document collection, the researcher was able to gain in-depth detail into the life of a study group and its members. With direct quotations obtained through the data sources, the researcher aimed to capture what actually took place. Descriptions and insights of people, activities, interactions, and settings were focused on and were all forthcoming as a result of the following methods of data collection. Overall, the data collected included transcriptions of 14 individual interviews and two group interviews, 19 study group sessions; field notes from 19 study group sessions; and three beginning and end of year self-assessments. Table 2 identifies the type and quantity of data collected. Descriptions of these data sources will follow.
Table 2

*Data Sources and Quantity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Individual Interviews</th>
<th>Group Interview Transcriptions</th>
<th>Field notes from Study Group Sessions</th>
<th>Study Group Transcriptions</th>
<th>Feed-back</th>
<th>District Self-Assessments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hayden</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwood</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Observations**

Observations were chosen as a key method of data collection because they allowed first hand access to study group events, settings, interactions, and outcomes. Becker and Geer (1970) suggested that such datum has the ability to give us more information about a particular event than data gathered by any other qualitative method.

While being a total participant observer (Key, 1997) in the Hayden group, I initially collected the data through written field notes. Field notes contained descriptions of experiences within the study group, observations, and quotes. These field notes guided the observation at the Southwood study group where the researcher acted as a passive observer (Key, 1997). Initially, only hand-written notes were taken. However, as trust was gained, the participants permitted audio recordings in both study groups.

**Individual and Group Interviews**

In addition to study group observations, individual interviews were conducted with those members of the observed study groups who voluntarily agreed to do so.
Interview participants were chosen as an additional method of data collection because it would allow the researcher insights into the individuals who comprise the study groups. Each interview took place privately at the location of the participant’s choice, whether it was in their respective classrooms or in the participant’s homes.

Additionally, follow-up group interviews were conducted with some members of both study groups at their respective school. Group interviews “give rise synergistically to insights and solutions that would not come about with them... and adds depth, detail, and meaning at a very personal level of experience” (Patton, 1990, p. 17). All eight participants who had completed the individual interviews participated in the group interviews.

A semi-structured interview guide approach was taken for both types of interviews, in which a set of guiding questions was asked, and new questions were asked as a result of the discussion (Spradley, 1979). The follow-up questions allowed me to cover any potential gaps in data at my discretion. Through answers to these open-ended questions, direct quotes from participants were available that provided insight into teacher perceptions on the level of effectiveness of their study groups.

During both types of interviews, a variety of content questions were asked, including those related to experience and behaviors, opinions and values, feelings, knowledge, and demographics. Prefatory statements were used to give the participants an inkling of the nature of questions that were going to be asked (Patton, 1990). All interviews were audio recorded. The semi-structured interview guides for study group participants are located in Appendix B.
Hayden participants were interviewed three times throughout the school year: shortly after the onset of the study group; mid-way through the year; and upon the study group ending at the end of the school year. Due to Southwood starting later in the school year, participants were interviewed shortly after their involvement with the study groups began and upon the study group ending at the end of the school year in a group interview.

**Feedback Cards**

Participant feedback cards were used to validate findings. Upon completion of each study group session at Hayden, the researcher asked participants to complete feedback cards. Participants were asked to share new learnings related to the content, questions that remained about the content, and a plan for implementing a new idea into their classroom. The questions on participant feedback cards are located in Appendix C and the results of feedback cards are in Appendix D.

**District Self-Assessments**

At the onset of the school year, the district provided a “Guided Reading Self-Assessment” (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) to each elementary teacher in the district, which assessed their perceived strength in several areas key to guided reading success. Teachers in the Hayden study group agreed to share their self-assessments for this research. The same self-assessment was given at the end of the school year to the Hayden participants. The growth that each teacher felt they had made was reflected through comparison of the two self-assessments each participant shared. The contents of the self-assessment related to the following key areas of guided reading:
classroom management, grouping, lesson management, engagement, text selection, introduction, teaching decisions, children’s talk, materials, text variation, and strategies incorporation. The District Self-Assessment is located in Appendix E.

Study Group Artifacts

The researcher also collected agendas and learning materials (e.g., articles, books, and professional literature) from the study groups. These documents were used as a basic source of information and as a reference tool when analyzing observation, feedback card data, and self-assessment data from the corresponding study session. A list of artifacts collected from both study groups is provided in Appendix G.

Researcher Reflections

Upon completion of attendance in each study group session, the researcher noted additional thinking and insights about the experience. The researcher tried to capture personal feelings and reflections as a result of the observations to better try to understand the perceptions teachers may have about their involvement with study groups.

Data Analysis

A wide range of data were collected through various means to gain better access to participant perceptions of the effectiveness of study groups. Lincoln and Guba (1985), as well as Stainback and Stainback (1988) suggested one way to corroborate the research findings accurately and ensure they depict participants’ perceptions, is through triangulation of the data. Denzin (1978) suggested triangulation can be achieved through use of multiple data sources. Triangulation in this study was achieved through analysis
and comparison of (1) interviews, self-assessments and feedback cards; (2) researcher observations and reflections; and (3) study group artifacts. Triangulation of the data collected is summarized in Figure 2.

![Figure 2. Triangulation of the Data Sources](image)

All interviews and most study group sessions were audio recorded, and relevant parts of recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure an accurate portrayal of participant perspectives and words. Through inductive analysis (Patton, 1990; Siegle, 2006), data was analyzed for patterns, themes, and categories.

Interviews and study group transcriptions, as well as researcher field notes and reflections, were read and analyzed by marking key points made. Key words and phrases were identified as critical and relevant if they were repeated by the majority of the participants. The key words and phrases were used to identify conceptual categories.
These conceptual categories were further used to identify patterns and themes repeated across several sets of transcripts. These patterns, themes, and categories emerged based on properties or dimensions identified by the researcher (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through use of Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) constant comparative method, all items coded were compared to others previously coded the same way. Key phrases and words in answers to interview questions were grouped according to the type of question they derived from (e.g., experience and behaviors, opinions and values, feelings, knowledge, and demographics), as well as that which was interesting or significant in an unanticipated way.

The researcher then summarized the contents of the categories to determine the main ideas within each. These main ideas, or themes, identified through coding and categorization were compared to the artifacts collected, feedback cards, as well as interviews, observations, and self-assessments. In addition, the Language Arts Coordinator reviewed the full set of interview codes and categories and assisted in the regrouping and interpretation of the data. A table of categories and codes is provided in Appendix H.

Artifacts collected during study groups were used to document and support participant activities, relevance to the content, and the context and conversations of the study groups. These documents were analyzed and compared to observations and interviews, noting anything of significance, such as similarities, differences, or categories that emerged. The artifacts helped provide a context in which the participants were involved.
Through this analytic process, patterns, themes, and categories that emerged were used to generate assertions and conclusions that support the research questions. The responses coded to best fit the specific research question will be included in Chapter IV, Results.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The overall findings of this research indicated that teachers felt the study group format for professional development benefited them in their preparation of guided reading and comprehension strategies. Through careful examination of the data, clear cut patterns and focal points emerged that supported the existing research, but also shed new light on areas yet untouched by research. The data was analyzed by examining the individual and group interviews, observations of the study groups and corresponding researcher reflections, participant self-assessments, and the feedback cards.

Through this chapter, the themes and categories that emerged through the analysis process will be described. Additionally, a comparison of the study groups at Hayden and Southwood will be provided, along with the activities and contextual features of each study group. The findings from interviews, observations, the district self-assessments, feedback cards, and artifacts will be shared. These data sources illustrated teacher perspectives on professional development, study groups, teachers themselves, student learning, and guided reading and comprehension strategies. However, to understand the implications of such findings, one must become more acquainted with the study group format, routine, and activities that participants experienced.

Study Group Comparison

Although Hayden and Southwood study groups emerged under a different set of circumstances, the objectives of better preparing teachers for guided reading and
comprehension strategy instruction were aligned. This objective targeted both the current year’s district and building goal of guided reading implementation and the upcoming school year’s district goal of comprehension strategy incorporation.

Logistically, both study groups approached the meetings in a similar fashion. They consistently met in the same classroom of one of the members. Each group met around a guided reading table, which is a small table seating roughly six people.

At both study groups, the sessions included discussion on readings where participants focused on the theory, research, and relevance of the topics, but also honed in on applicable ideas or considerations for their own practice. All sessions included a focus on a pre-determined reading relevant to the topic at hand. Discussion and inquiry followed. As the study groups progressed, the surface-level conversation eventually led to problem solving; seeking, sharing, and adapting ideas; and validating each other’s practices. Both groups used professional literature to guide the discussions and chose to use Harvey and Goudvis’ (2000) *Strategies that Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding*. Facilitators at both groups provided additional professional literature to supplement the theory and research aspect of guided reading and comprehension strategies.

However, due to the different circumstances surrounding their start, they each developed their own unique study group personality and mode of operation. Each developed its own method to achieve the group objective with individuals working toward their own personal goals. Both study groups approached their topic of study in a
fashion that best met their needs. Despite the common focus, members of the study groups were in very different points of implementation and comfort with guided reading and comprehension strategy instruction.

Detailed description of study group activities provided for Hayden is more extensive for a few reasons. First, the researcher had an increased familiarity and level of involvement with the Hayden group. As the facilitator, the researcher was involved from the onset. Second, the Hayden group also met for the duration of the entire school year, whereas the Southwood study group only met for five months. Through the increased involvement and extended nature of the Hayden study group, there were more opportunities for data to be collected, analyzed, and reported.

The Hayden Study Group

Due to an influx of teachers unfamiliar with guided reading at Hayden, a study group was formed at the onset of the school year to better help them prepare for and implement guided reading. The Hayden Leadership Team felt this might be one way to support the new teachers, but did not mandate attendance. Three of the new teachers elected to be a part of the study group at the onset. They represented second and third grades. One of the teachers and the facilitator were in their first year of teaching and the other two were seasoned teachers, just new to the guided reading process.

The Hayden study group began at the onset of the school year with a vague sense of the direction in which they were headed. The teachers new to the building, in addition to the facilitator, were greatly overwhelmed with the district and building expectations associated with their grade levels, as well as with guided reading implementation.
The facilitator provided a list of potential study topics related to guided reading designed to focus the efforts of the study group. The group came to a consensus with research and theory being of foremost importance at the onset. They wanted to increase their background knowledge and understand why guided reading was considered to be so powerful in literacy education. The group used a variety of professional literature provided by the facilitator to help foster their understanding. The main sources were Fountas and Pinnell's *Guided Reading: First Good Teaching For All Children* (1996) and *Guiding Readers and Writers: Teaching Comprehension, Genre, and Content Literacy*, (2001). The facilitator also provided information from Saunders-Smith’s books, *The Ultimate Guided Reading How To Book* (2003) and *The Ultimate Small Group Reading How To Book* (2005).

Several sessions revolved around the participants building their background knowledge of guided reading. In addition to professional literature and discussion, several videos of expert teachers doing guided reading were shared. A shared knowledge and foundation of understanding emerged within the group. As the group moved their focus from guided reading to comprehension strategies, participants also used Miller’s (2002) *Reading With Meaning* and the aforementioned *Strategies that Work* (2000) by Harvey and Goudvis. The facilitator also provided information from Ellin Oliver-Keene and Susan Zimmerman’s (1997) *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader’s Workshop*, as well as Pinnell and Scharer’s (2003) *Teaching for Comprehension in Reading Grades K-2: Strategies for Helping Children Read with Ease, Confidence, and Understanding*. 
Due to a district deadline of implementation for guided reading looming, participants began the planning process of bringing guided reading into their classroom while still working toward their understanding about guided reading. At this time, the group focused their energies on how to start planning and implementing guided reading into their classroom. They were beginning to apply their new learnings to their practice. One teacher remembered the initial weeks of guided reading and said, “I read it in the book and to have other teachers talking about it was helpful. To try it, [as well as] reread as I did it, led to a lot more reflection on it. I applied what I was learning.” During this period of time, the study group sessions were used by participants to further their understanding of guided reading, but also make inquiries related to logistics, students, and materials.

At the request of the teachers, the facilitator planned a guided reading lesson for a select group of students from each of their respective rooms and modeled a guided reading lesson in their room. The teachers determined what students would be in the group and what the strategy focus should be. This afforded the teachers a firsthand look at guided reading with their students. One appreciative teacher said, “It was really helpful and I really appreciated seeing your lesson with some of my students.”

Each participant set a personal goal for their classroom in terms of an implementation deadline. They all opted to plan and try a few lessons with a small number of groups over the period of a couple of weeks to get the idea of how guided
reading would "look" in their classroom. The participants worked to create a system of organization and flow that would best meet the needs of the students and the teachers themselves.

Up until that point, the study group was meeting weekly if possible for 60 to 75 minutes after school or during the pre-determined collaboration time provided by the district, and working around conflicts as best they could. After the initial guided reading implementation started and they felt they were in compliance with the district expectation, the group members felt it would be best to meet every two weeks. The schedule of bi-weekly meetings continued until midway through the school year. About six weeks into the study group meeting, a veteran third grade teacher who was still feeling her way through guided reading joined the group.

As the mid-year approached, a new set of external pressures was being placed on the study group participants and the sense of commitment to the group appeared to wane. The group started to lose the momentum it had gained. These external pressures related to changes in schedules, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, parent-teacher conferences, holidays, health concerns, and curriculum challenges. The third grade teachers reported being especially weighed down by the new science adoption. One Hayden teacher said, "I felt like I was learning it with the kids. It was brand new, just like guided reading. But maybe even more. There was just so much to organize."

The facilitator spoke with each member individually to assess their level of interest and commitment to the group. Each reported frustrations and concerns that impacted their own personal involvement. Some of these frustrations included being
overwhelmed with other obligations, commitment and time to complete the readings and attend meetings, an intimidation factor of administrators present at the sessions, frustrations with their own progress, and tangential discussions. At the end of the school year, one teacher recalled a positive turning point for the group, “We revisited [my needs and the needs of the study group] individually with [the facilitator] to decide what avenue to take to be successful. By those personal conversations, we were redirected.” Another said, “We made the changes we all needed to make this group work. We needed to stop and figure out what was happening. By [the facilitator] taking that initiative to talk with us, we went back and fixed it. We were all comfortable with [the facilitator], so we made our thoughts known. The changes have worked.”

After a month off due to the holiday break, the study group reconvened and the fate of the group was determined. Each member reaffirmed their commitment to being a member of the group. While the group elected to continue meeting every two weeks, they decided to meet for only 30 minutes in the morning. Through the subsequent meetings, it appeared as though productivity increased as the session times of the group decreased. One Hayden member confirmed this by saying, “The study group has gotten more productive. Because we had to. We only had so much time.” After the eleventh session, another said “This session was short, but good.”

At this time in the year, the focus of the group also changed from how to implement guided reading to focusing their energies on student learning during guided reading. The group decided before they became too comfortable with guided reading at a status quo level, they wanted to strengthen the instruction and start to incorporate
comprehension strategies. This was another new topic to all of the members. They chose specific strategies to study in relation to the building focus for each grade level. Additionally, at the request of the third grade team members, a study group session focused on Running Records, a form of informal assessment used with readers.

At the suggestion of one of the current study group members, another seasoned second grade teacher was invited to join our group as an intermediary. It was hoped that through this teacher, the bridge between what was being attempted by the new teachers and what had been done in the building related to guided reading and comprehension strategy instruction would be fostered. Through her involvement, a better understanding of the current practices in Hayden emerged. Most importantly, teachers who had been in the study group came away with a sense that even the teachers who were experienced with guided reading, “were still learning and [hadn’t yet achieved] a mastery level. It was an ongoing process.” This was validation for the new teachers.

This was a time of great productivity for the group. A sense of empowerment appeared to have emerged on the part of all the teachers. The following types of statements became more frequent: “This is the day I realized that [guided reading] is possible! I can do it!” Each session concluded with the facilitator assisting the group in formulating a plan for the next meeting, including the topics and readings. At the end of each session, the members were all asked to complete feedback cards in which they reflected on the session.

Each study group session had its own personality. Most of the time, the members of the group were motivated and energized. A real sense of empowerment had evolved.
At other times, the group appeared less enthusiastic about their goal and progress. This became more evident mid-year when they were feeling the many aforementioned external pressures. This subsided as the group renewed their efforts. It became evident at times that certain individuals were preoccupied with other things or not interested in the topics at hand, based on their level of involvement or enthusiasm.

As the end of the school year approached, a new set of scheduling challenges emerged for the Hayden study group. A segment of the teachers felt there was not ample time to complete the assignments or attend meetings as regularly. A host of end-of-the-year tasks had begun to take precedence over the study group. At this point, the study group members felt the group should dissolve for the school year, so they could focus on these end-of-the-year responsibilities.

The Southwood Study Group

The five seasoned teachers in this study group represented third through sixth grades. They were all in their second year of guided reading implementation in their respective grades, yet were at very different levels of comfort and experience with guided reading and their understanding and implementation of comprehension strategies. Some teachers wanted to learn the basics of the comprehension strategies, while others wanted to beef up their current knowledge and application to include incorporation into their guided reading lessons. This presented a challenge for the group in terms of meeting each member's needs.

The Southwood study group emerged as a result of district professional development which occurred mid-year that focused on comprehension strategies across
The literacy curriculum. This professional development session was introductory in nature, with the intent to help teachers become familiar with the upcoming year's district goals. As a result, this study group was facilitated by the District Language Arts Coordinator, who offered to facilitate as a means of helping prepare teachers for professional development initiatives that would be underway the following school year.

The sessions at Southwood started with two members and the Language Arts Coordinator. This group was more informal in nature, but was geared toward the needs of those two original teachers. The three met for a few months. With a desire to include other teachers from various grade levels, more teachers were invited and came on board.

The formal study group then began with five classroom teachers. Although the Language Arts Coordinator was present and active in all sessions, the group decided to share the facilitation process and rotate the responsibility. The Language Arts Coordinator helped the group establish ground rules for meeting, which included being prompt, staying focused, being prepared, and having a willingness to share. The group also decided they would meet every three weeks for 45 minutes in the classroom of a fifth grade teacher during the preparation and collaboration time provided by the district.

The Southwood teachers came with different ideas of how the study group could best meet their needs. Teachers suggested study topics could be literature circles, reciprocal teaching, balancing the literacy curriculum, as well as comprehension strategies and guided reading. With the facilitation of the Language Arts Coordinator, the group came to a consensus about what to focus on and how to study the topic chosen. The group concluded that they wanted to focus on comprehension strategies in the guided
reading curriculum. At this point, they decided to read *Strategies That Work* (2000) by Harvey and Goudvis and use that to guide their sessions.

The Southwood teachers met for a total of five months and worked through three of seven comprehension strategies. They had nearly perfect attendance at all sessions, despite the hectic schedules of many of the teachers. Their study group concluded toward the end of the school year as the group came to a consensus that the schedule was too rigorous and the end of the school year too close to continue. At the conclusion of the last session, one teacher profusely thanked the Language Arts Coordinator and asked if “we can do this next year?” All members of the group indicated an interest in continuing. The group then discussed others they may want to get involved, what their course of action might be, and potential strategies to focus on initially.

**Findings**

All of the data collected shed light on teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of study group involvement. In the data collected, teachers clearly indicated their acceptance of the study group as a channel for effective professional development. Through further analysis and triangulation of the data, categories emerged in the areas of professional development, study groups, teacher characteristics, student learning, as well as guided reading and comprehension strategies.

Individual and group interview responses were coded and categorized. Individual interviews included three formal interviews with Hayden teachers, as well as one informal discussion about their goals and commitment to the group mid-way in the year. Southwood teachers were interviewed at the onset one time individually. Both Hayden
and Southwood teachers were then a part of a group interview at the end of the school year. Observation data were collected through attendance at study group sessions at both Hayden and Southwood. These data were also coded and categorized. Categories that emerged through interviews and observations included professional development; study group tasks and benefits; teacher learning preferences, roles, feelings, and wishes; student learning; and group dynamics and personalities.

Fountas and Pinnell (1996) provided a self-assessment in their guided reading book that allowed teachers to rate their perceived status on a variety of guided reading related categories. This self-assessment provided further evidence of teacher perceptions of their growth through the school year as it related to guided reading and comprehension strategies. The self-assessments were used at the onset of the school year at Hayden as a baseline to measure teachers' perceived growth on a variety of areas related to guided reading. At the end of the school year, the self-assessment was completed with teachers recording their perceived growth in the same areas. The areas measured related to materials, classroom management, groupings, lesson management, text selection, introduction, teaching decisions, children's talk, engagement, and pace of the lesson. The teachers rated each item and a numerical value of one, two, three, or four was applied to the responses. Then the results were tallied to provide a quantitative perspective of the teacher's perceived growth. The self-assessment instrument is located in Appendix E and the results can be found in Appendix F.

The feedback cards were completed at the end of each Hayden study group session. It should be noted that due to time constraints, the cards were often hurriedly
filled out and somewhat incomplete. Nonetheless, the responses gleaned important information the participants were thinking about in regards to the preceding session. The feedback card responses led to the emergence of categories; some of which resembled categories that emerged from the interviews and observations. In order of highest frequency, the categories that emerged were practical applications, teacher decisions, student learning and engagement, logistics and management, purpose and vision, strategy focus, student assessment, theory and research. The coded responses of the feedback card analysis are located in Appendix H.

Artifacts collected throughout both study groups supported the focus for each lesson. These artifacts included an overview of topics related to guided reading and comprehension strategies, agendas, “Key Points” information sheets, graphic organizers, lesson plans, professional articles, chapters from relevant books, lesson plan formats, questions for reflection, thank you notes, and email communications. These artifacts provided a frame of reference through the analysis process in relation to focus, learnings, dynamics, and communications of the group. Some of the artifacts were provided by the facilitators of the study groups;, others were shared at additional district professional development or by members themselves. A list of artifacts is located in Appendix E.

Professional Development

Effective professional development. Several recurring themes and phrases emerged when teachers referred to effective professional development. Many teachers appeared to have had some negative experiences with professional development in recent years. In fact, two teachers remarked about successful professional development
allowing them to take only one new learning away! One Southwood teacher said, “If I take away one good thing, then all is not lost.” However, they indicated a reasonable desire for more from their professional development. The teachers at Hayden and Southwood were quickly able to pinpoint the strengths of professional development they deemed to be effective. Three elements of effective professional development stood out.

First, “relevant” and “meaningful” were words used regularly to describe effective professional development. Relevance had to be related to an apparent cohesiveness between district professional development initiatives and district and building goals, as well as to their own personal and classroom goals. Teachers desired a shared goal and vision that meshed with their individual needs. Shared learning and a common frame of reference were important to teachers. One Hayden teacher shared, “The study group complemented professional development initiatives.” Another said, “Our study group mirrored what the district was doing”. The third teacher said, “Yeah, we would do something in the study group and then focus on it in professional development.” They concluded that their study group initiative was very much aligned with the building and district goals. Many of the teachers viewed the study group as a piece of the larger professional development pie.

Most importantly, however, they wanted professional development opportunities that would lead to improved teaching and student learning. Teachers’ perceptions of relevant professional development improved with the likelihood of it being embedded and applicable to their teaching. Teachers vocalized the need for their learning to be relevant to their students, classroom, and school. They wanted to see the value in what
they were doing, the rationale for it, and how it directly impacted teacher instruction and student learning. One Southwood teacher reported, “Effective professional development led to increased talking about [student] learning, which led to more ‘doing’, which led to more talking, which led to more experiences and more ideas.”

The feedback cards mirrored this desire for relevance and vision. As the study group continued throughout the year, teachers had an increased sense of being purposeful in their lessons and seeing a larger vision in their teaching. Purpose and vision were reflected on after 9 of 11 sessions. This sense of purpose appeared to grow from related professional development sessions in which the Language Arts Coordinator really helped teachers to understand the need for being purposeful in their teaching. They grew to understand the necessity of teaching with intent. These teachers clearly did not want to just walk through the motions of teaching guided reading. They wanted their lessons to be purposeful and powerful with the intent of improved student learning. They wanted to know why they chose the books, strategy, focus, or groups they did. This was evidenced by such comments as “The introduction can be lengthy, but should be purposeful”, “Know what strategies or skills you will focus on from a book”, or “I'm realizing how important text selection is to the guided reading group.”

At the onset of the study group, the teachers had a difficult time envisioning what guided reading would “look like” in their classroom. In fact, many teachers felt it was difficult to know if they would even be ready or able to implement guided reading. One teacher recalled, “I didn’t think I would ever be doing guided reading. I didn’t expect to
get to the point that I am. I think I am further than I thought I would be at the beginning of the year.”

As the teachers worked through their vision of guided reading, they first worked through very basic elements of guided reading that morphed into a larger vision. Teachers realized for guided reading to be effective, despite the flexibility, “It was important to follow the steps of the lesson.” They wondered, “What will guided reading look like for me?” “How can I make the [work station] activities more meaningful to students?” Another saw the larger picture in terms of content application and said, “Continue to use [the strategy] with guided practice, but also take it into social studies and science.” As one Hayden teacher shared,

I had a different picture of guided reading at the beginning of the year. Now, it is balanced, but different than how I envisioned. I had more of a vision of a primary classroom, than in a middle grade. The kids are more mature and that it is different. The content is also different. It is positive where we are at, but my picture is different. I think my picture changed because of the needs of the classroom, it was natural after trying it. After you try it, you realize what it is about and how it works for you and your kids. It doesn’t have to look like the video tapes. My picture wasn’t bad, but it was just different.

Second, the teachers perceived the facilitator of professional development and study groups alike to have desirable characteristics conducive to fostering teacher learning. Of utmost importance was the facilitator’s ability to meet their individual needs and provide relevance for their learning. They wanted more direction for their learning and expressed the desire to voice concerns about their professional development opportunities.

Teachers also indicated the facilitator should be “knowledgeable” and have “expertise”. There was much perceived value in having “experts” involved in the study
groups, as well as access to videos and literature. Many of the teachers felt they were really looking for guidance on how to move to the next level of understanding and practice and that someone with expertise and knowledge would foster that process. In fact, one Southwood teacher stated to the facilitator, “This is wonderful of you to [facilitate the study group]. This is what I needed to get going. We need this time to share ideas. We are all lost on certain things.”

Additionally, teachers identified personality traits to also be important. Teachers expressed the desire for a facilitator to be “responsive”, “flexible”, “practical” and “attentive”. Additional qualities possessed by the facilitator were “good natured” and “personable”. Teachers appeared to believe that facilitators with these personality characteristics would have an easier time relating to them and their needs, being flexible and responsive, and most concerned with fostering their growth.

A third element of professional development that emerged included professional development opportunities being sharply tailored to teacher learning preferences. They deemed this a pre-requisite for effectiveness. In fact, an overwhelming majority of teachers interviewed referred to needing “active learning”, “learning by doing”, or “hands-on learning”. Teachers sought opportunities to collaborate that allowed them to interpret and understand shared learnings, plan, implement, evaluate, and problem solve. In conjunction, teachers expressed their desire for more visual stimulus, such as live demonstrations, videos, lesson plans, or graphic organizers.

Gradual release model. The four elements of Joyce and Showers’ (1995) gradual release model of professional development emerged through interviews with the
participants and observations of the study groups. The four elements to the gradual release model included (1) theory, (2) demonstration, (3) initial and guided practice, and (4) coaching. Teachers indicated a preference for support at all of the levels of the release model.

A significant number of teacher interview responses reflected the need for theory and research as a backdrop for better understanding of guided reading and solid implementation. Responses such as “The literature makes sense” and “Research is necessary” indicated the level of importance theory and research played in understanding. One participant went on further to say, “Theory and research played a big role. The research done by predecessors helped me to be well-read. I felt like I knew the facts before I tried to apply it. It built a base for me.” Another teacher reinforced this same notion by saying, “I can’t teach what I don’t know.” Not only did teachers reflect on the importance of theory and research in their understanding in interviews, it was also evident as an observer in the study groups. A vast number of coded responses demonstrated teachers tying theory and research they pulled from their readings to practice in their discussions. Teachers spent a great deal of time trying to identify what carried the most meaning for them from the literature. It truly appeared to be a synthesis of professional development, literature, and experiences.

Although the study group foundation was based on theory and research, two of the three teachers in the Hayden group did not consider themselves to be “theoretical”. Of the seven responses related to theory and research, six were made by the third member who vocalized comfort with and appreciated the perspectives of theory and research.
Many of the comments considered by the researcher to be theoretical in nature, also related to other categories that emerged from the feedback cards. The thinking of the teachers was clearly influenced by the reading that had taken place. Examples included, "Guided reading is guided thinking", "Guided reading has a primary focus of expanding comprehension strategies", or "[The focus should be] teaching the student, not the strategy." All of the aforementioned insights were gained from exploration of theory and research to support guided reading and comprehension strategies.

While theory and research appeared important to most teachers, another teacher shared that they could “get good information from books, but [to understand it] you need to get different perspectives through talking about it.” A Hayden teacher said, “My application from the reading was more from the ideas shared. I have never been able to reflect on research and theory.” Later in the year, this same teacher later went so far as to say, “I am not a big theory person. I am just more of a ‘Get to the meat of what it is’ kind of person. Tell me what I need to do. I want to know what and how, but not so much why. That’s me!” Another teacher said, “I hate research and theory. I know it is important. I don’t always understand what they are saying. It is an avoidance thing for me. If someone can say ‘This is what they are saying’ then I get it. Talking through it is okay.” This clearly supported the notion that many teachers don’t feel “theoretical”, yet are somewhat cognizant of the need to include theory and research as a basis for their learning.

The second element of the gradual release model emerged. Teachers expressed a great desire for demonstrations, modeling, videos, and other tangible examples they could
see. In reference to learning preferences, many teachers indicated they were visual learners. In the words of one teacher, they wanted to know “how it looked when it is done right”. Another said, “Reading about it just wouldn’t be sufficient.” Through the videos initially, teachers were able to see teachers doing guided reading. At Hayden, this led to teachers requesting opportunities for live modeling in their classrooms.

Third, teachers became cognizant to the importance of practicing and applying the new learning. Of the four areas of this professional development model, this element is the one teachers referred to most often. One Southwood teacher described her method of implementation as a cycle of “jumping in, making mistakes, and revising.” Another Hayden teacher comparably said, “Reading it, seeing it, doing it, and reflecting on it” was her approach to implementation. Others appeared to apply bits and pieces of their new learning at a more moderate pace with a little less risk taking. All of the Hayden teachers felt the study group provided teachers a “safe haven” to share ideas, was a forum for openness, and fostered a willingness to “try different things and take risks.”

Lastly, although some teachers mentioned the need for ongoing support, little was revealed about coaching. When asked to reflect on the need for coaching or being observed, the responses indicated a less than desirable level of comfort with it. There appeared to be reluctance present on the part of most teachers to have others watch them teach, as evidenced in interviews and observations. One Hayden teacher said, “It would make me nervous.” While another said, “There would be a pressure to perform.” The third said, “It depends on who is coming in and why they are doing it.” The Southwood teachers felt the same. One teacher reported, “We are curious about our teaching, but it is
embarrassing.” Another verified this by saying, “I would hate it, yet at the same time, I would value it. It would be both uncomfortable, but helpful.” Yet one confirmed this with “I need their input. That is how we learn.” There doesn’t seem to be an opposition to coaching, as much as a hurdle to overcoming the discomfort that accompanies coaching. Many teachers felt the study groups adequately provided ongoing support and filled this role to meet their needs.

While much insight about professional development emerged from analysis of the data, teachers also expressed their many perceptions about study groups as an effective means of professional development.

Study Groups

Several categories related to study groups emerged through the analysis process. The following will be elaborated on: (1) characteristics of effective study groups, (2) study group focus, (3) study group tasks, (4) study group benefits and value, and (5) study group challenges.

Characteristics of effective study groups. Teachers were quick to point out features and characteristics of effective study groups. Overwhelmingly, teachers felt effective study groups fostered a sense of “comfort”, “collaboration and cooperation” and lent themselves to a “willingness and openness to share”. Teachers also defined effective study groups as being “flexible”, yet having a “shared goal” or “common focus”. Nearly all teachers felt being “on-task” with a “clear-cut agenda” was a sign of an effective study group. Many teachers said a facilitator was needed to be a “task master” and keep the teachers focused. Equally important were committed members who were responsible.
Most importantly, an effective study group was “supportive of classroom instruction” and in the words of a Hayden teacher, “helped me focus on my goal of improving my classroom”, as well as provided “moral support”.

**Study group focus.** Through the interviews, teachers consistently reported that the focus of the group was of the utmost importance. Teachers wanted to ensure their group was progressing forward with a common focus. One teacher reported, “Through conversation, we found a focus.” Repeatedly through interviews and observations, teachers made it clear that their focus of guided reading and comprehension strategies related to their district and building goals. Discussion of district professional development experiences became intertwined with study group sessions. In fact, one teacher said, “To be honest, if we didn’t have this study group, I probably wouldn’t be doing as much as I am now.” Another followed up with “Of all the professional development initiatives, this has been the most meaningful.” A third teacher said, “This study group has been the missing [professional development] component for me.”

The groups worked intently to keep focused with short and long term goals related to their area of study. They spent a good deal of time focusing on both the content of their study, but also the processes needed for implementation of guided reading and comprehension strategies. There was a high infusion of guided reading and comprehension strategies evidenced through their discussions, questions, and reflections. One Hayden teacher said, “Everything I have done this year, I have implemented because of the study group. I came in with little ideas of what to do. Through this study group, I
have learned there are other ways to do things. I have tried a lot of ideas for books and
different ways to organize.”

Teachers repeatedly expressed concerns of tangential discussions that often led
the group away from their topic at hand. There was real concern expressed about the
personal agendas that influenced their study group, and how that may have impacted their
focus. Although one teacher recognized that the group “isn’t going to focus just around
my needs”, there were concerns that other teachers demanded too much time of the group
to address their varied struggles in the classroom that related to teaching, but often were
not applicable or relevant to other members. This in turn led to disengagement at times
on the part of these frustrated members. The observations of the study groups confirmed
the trend to veer off track due to personal needs of individual members, as well as the
disengagement of other members. Some members took the liberty to use the group as a
sounding board for many of their perceived classroom problems. While inquiry and
problem solving was one of the chief tasks of the group, occasionally a few members
demanded a great deal of time from their peers. Oftentimes, leaders emerged within the
group that brought everyone back on track should tangents occur.

**Study group tasks.** As teachers reflected on their study groups in the interviews,
three categories of tasks that the group engaged in emerged. Hayden teachers indicated
the main tasks of the study group were sharing and modifying ideas, problem solving and
inquiry, and dialogue and conversation. Their reflections corresponded with the
observations of the researcher and data analysis.
Teachers regularly shared ideas related to readings, planning, implementation, and problem solving. Through ideas being shared, they also elaborated and altered these ideas to apply to different students and classrooms, as well as fit different purposes. As one teacher said, "It could have been one idea that morphed into another and just kept going." They made their ideas relevant to their personal circumstances. For example, teacher often adapted graphic organizers for other books, purposes, or grade levels, and also suggested alternative ideas for writing or extension activities. One Hayden teacher had a difficult time finding the right graphic organizer or writing extension to go with "My Frog Log" guided reading book. The teacher shared the ideas he had, but sought the help of his peers. This example illustrated the way they provided a variety of quick and practical alternatives to group members.

Due to the newness and complexities of guided reading and comprehension strategies, both groups regularly used the time for problem solving and inquiry. This focus related to such things as logistical and management elements like scheduling and grouping. Many discussions centered on how to best group and remain flexible in grouping for students that span the reading abilities. For example, one discussion focused on the frequency and length of groups for struggling readers versus readers who were above grade level. There were also several discussions about grouping by reading level versus strategic processing needs. Also, teachers problem-solved a variety of issues related to developing a more solid and shared understanding, student learning, and planning and implementation. An example of this involved teachers when they were
developing plans and discussion centered on which lesson plan to use for their level of readers or how to best adapt one to meet their needs, or how to find the “just right” book for a strategy focus.

Through other types of dialogue in the group, teachers often used the time together to clarify understandings, practice, and intentions. Many members also felt comfortable using the study group as a forum for seeking advice and support from their peers. Yet other teachers offered the verbal encouragement and validation needed to work through the challenging times. One teacher said, “The study group met its objectives. It made me more comfortable with what I am doing. It gave me more ideas. It helped me to see through the process. I asked questions, listened to what other people said.”

Study group benefits. Study group members perceived a host of benefits that resulted through their involvement in the study group. These benefits related to collaboration, reflection, validation, new learning, increased self-efficacy, a sense of togetherness, and accountability.

First, teachers felt collaboration was a natural outcome of the study group. Of nine responses, seven teachers indicated collaboration increased through their time in the study group. Two Southwood teachers felt they hadn’t seen collaboration increase yet, but thought that it still might. In terms of collaboration, many teachers felt that the district administrators would like to see more collaboration within buildings, but the opportunities haven’t been created to cultivate that. In fact, one Southwood teacher said
it best when she said, “Collaboration is important, but not fostered [at the district level]”. “Everyone is doing their own individual thing. There is no one coming and talking to me.”

These teachers expressed value in having time to collaborate about new learning, planning, implementing, evaluating, and problem solving. In fact, one teacher stated, “All my best ideas come from other people”, while two others shared the same sentiment. In the words of a first year teacher, “collaboration is extremely important and I am a big advocate. Each of us has neat ideas. All of us together create all sorts of ideas that you may have never had if you weren’t collaborating. However, for collaboration to be most effective, I needed to be able to take tangible things to my classroom and apply them.”

Teachers felt they can come away with more ideas by talking with each other and “picking their brains”.

Teachers believed the study group fostered collaboration. “The study group [led] to collaboration. We come away thinking and talking”, said one Southwood teacher. Another teacher stated, “Collaboration is necessary for a healthy classroom environment. If you don’t have collaboration, you miss out on an element of something that could be to its fullest.” The Hayden teachers all agreed that collaboration outside the study group increased as well. One Hayden teacher said, “We shared ideas outside of the study group, whether we realized it or not.”

The second outcome of study group involvement appeared to be reflection. Although many of the teachers thought they were reflective prior to their involvement in the study group, some felt the reflection process was enhanced. When asked if reflection
increased as a result of the study group in the group interview, all Southwood teachers said it had and all but one Hayden teacher said it had.

In reference to reflection, a Southwood teacher said, “I think we are talking about things more. We always do self-reflection, but we are sharing more.” Another followed up with, “Now that we have time to share, I am thinking about things more. The study group makes me stop and reflect where we have been and how it [went].” One Hayden teacher also said, “I am very reflective, so I ask a lot of questions.” The same teacher later went on to say, “At the end of each day, you look and see what has worked and what hasn’t. You also need to include kids in the process. Listen to what they are saying. Their reflections, spontaneous or planned, are important.”

As teachers referred to their purposes for reflection, they most often critically reflected on their teaching and classroom application. They also mentioned that through reflection they are able to make changes that impact those areas. This was evident also in the study groups, as they often critiqued their teaching, thinking, choices, and student learning. A small number referred to reflective practice in terms of professional literature, theory, or research, but many made no reference. In fact, one Hayden teacher said, “[Reflection on literature] hasn’t changed at all. My application was more from the ideas shared, not the reflection of the theory.”

Interestingly, a new teacher just out of the local university had much practice with reflection and actually recited the reflection motto so frequently used at the university. Due to those reflective experiences, his response indicated the positive he felt, “I felt pretty good at reflecting about what I have done. I think my skills have strengthened
from having to reflect each time. I had pretty good knowledge from [the university] about reflection. We reflected on everything and I am a reflective practitioner.”

Conversely, one teacher felt reflection was not a natural outcome of the study group. She reported being reflective during the teaching, but not as much after the teaching was over. “I think I said I was reflecting at the beginning of the year, but I don’t think I was. I still don’t reflect well. I reflect after the lesson and while it is going on. I don’t do a reflection on the log.”

A third perceived benefit study group members identified was overall new learning. When asked if they saw noticeable changes in their teaching, all of the teachers agreed it had. One teacher said, “As a result of this study group, I felt more comfortable with guided reading and gained extra knowledge.” This new learning helped take the teachers to a new level of understanding about guided reading and comprehension strategies. In turn, the deeper understanding fostered change in practice and growth in themselves. One Hayden teacher said, “The different things I have taken away from guided reading, the study groups, different inservices, talking with colleagues and asking questions- I am still a novice, but am working myself up in ranks.” Later in the conversation, the same teacher said, “My knowledge base has gotten a lot bigger. I have gained so many more ideas. Well, I started at the bottom and I only had one way to go and that was up.” This teacher continued to say, “I had no idea what I was doing at all. Now, I can make lesson plans and know what I am doing. I share my lessons with others and they are using them. It makes me feel good when they tell me how great the lessons were and that they used them.”
Many of the teachers reflected back to the onset of the school year and the vision of what guided reading and comprehension strategy instruction looked like in their classroom. One teacher shared transformative thinking in saying, “My thoughts on guided reading changed. At the beginning I was really focused on the content. Now I am more focused on the strategy and am using the strategy to make the content more interesting.”

During the Hayden group interview, the teachers all said their knowledge of guided reading grew and as a result guided reading would not look like it does in the classroom without the ongoing support of the study group. The following comments substantiate their thinking: “I would still only be doing the same thing”, “I never would have touched anything else”, and “It would not look the same and not just in guided reading. It has affected everything. In our content... social studies, math, science. I think it has impacted guided reading as much as the other areas. The strategies carry over to everything we teach.”

The district self-assessment corroborated new learning as a substantial benefit to the teachers in the study group. On the whole, Hayden teachers reported growth in all areas, with the exception of one teacher who felt there were 2 of 11 areas that remained consistent. The average growth of the group for all learning areas was 1.84. This value implied that the teachers ranked themselves up an average of 1.84 on the scale to represent their growth. The largest growth areas that were above the average of 1.84 were guided reading lesson management (2.83), student engagement (2.3), materials (2), comprehension strategies (2), classroom management (2), and lesson pace (2).
Of these areas, a great deal of time was spent on all but lesson pace during study group sessions. Once teachers experienced guided reading, they reported that the flow of the lessons naturally evolved into a comfortable pace of instruction. Lesson management referred to the comfort with using all the steps of a guided reading lesson, including before, during, and after reading activities. Student engagement referred to the teacher’s ability to engage the children’s attention throughout the lesson. Classroom management referred to the organizational system teachers had in place for grouping, schedules, frequency of groups, size of groups, and learning activities for students not in the small group. All three teachers tried a variety of ways to address each of those. And while not perfected, they are all satisfied with the system they have in place, knowing they will make improvements to it next year. Materials referred to the teacher’s familiarity with guided reading materials available to them, as well as having an ample supply of teaching materials.

While growth was seen in all areas, the smallest growth areas that were below the average of 1.84 were grouping (1.83), text selection (1.5), teacher decisions (1.3), children’s talk (1.3), and text introductions (1.2). Grouping referred to forming small groups who were similar developmentally in terms of strategies or text level. This was a struggle for one Hayden teacher in particular, who said, “It’s hard for kids to be in certain groups [based on reading level] because they know where they stand and for some kids that is very upsetting.” This teacher’s goal for the upcoming school year was to create a workable grouping system based more on strategy need than text level.
Text selection referred to the text chosen, as well as its appropriateness for the group and the strategy focus desired. This also referred to how teachers utilized graphic organizers and writing to accompany the text. Due to the vast guided reading resources available to teachers, many felt they did not have adequate time to become familiar with the resources. Teachers used the study group as a way to familiarize themselves with the contents of the book room. Teachers also shared books they felt lent to specific strategies they were working on. Despite the focus on texts, teachers still reported a lack of confidence in choosing the “just right” text to meet their students’ needs.

Teacher decisions referred to the teacher’s comfort with teaching points as they occurred, their level of responsiveness to students based on observation, and decisions made to assist students through the material with more of a focus. Interestingly, after analysis of the feedback cards, teacher decisions were often something that was referenced throughout the course of the study group, which corroborated the perception of less growth in that area. Teachers correlated confidence with decision making. Teachers reported that confidence played a large role in their decision making. The more they implemented, the more confident they became, which in turn led them to being more decisive.

Teacher decisions were also referred to regularly throughout 8 of 11 sessions and were equally important to all three participants. Teacher decisions could be subcategorized into those related to planning and organizing for implementation of guided reading; the decisions made before, during, and after reading with students; strategy and lesson focus; and student assessment. Examples of responses about teacher
decisions included, “Do I need to meet with each group more frequently?”, “How do you pick a book and find the right strategy to use with it?”, or “What is cross-checking?”

Children’s talk referred to engaging students in talking about their interpretations of the stories and learnings and the teacher’s ability to foster that type of thinking and dialogue. As the time went on, teachers began to understand the importance of tuning into children’s talk as a way to assess their understanding and interpretations.

Despite a great deal of time spent on text introductions in the way of readings, videos, and discussion, the teacher’s perceived growth did not reflect that. In reference to text introductions, A Hayden teacher said,

I am worried about not getting stuck in the [introduction] and moving on to the rest of the lesson. You don’t want it to consume too much time of the guided reading lesson. It can easily go off on a tangent you didn’t anticipate and it all depends on how kids respond. You just don’t know what their response will be and it can go so many different directions. You bring your own assumptions about what kids know and you may be wrong. If it starts to go a different way, you have to let it and be flexible enough.

Another Hayden teacher said,

You have to have a good [text introduction] getting into the story. Trying to find a hook to engage kids is not my strong suit. We worked on it in our study group and I know it will come with time. It is so important because if they are not engaged, then we have lost them through the rest of the book.

Interestingly, the teacher with the largest perceived growth through all areas on the self-assessment often vocalized the value she saw in guided reading, the study group, and theory. Conversely, the teacher with the smallest perceived growth often vocalized a disdain for theory and research, admitted an ongoing reluctance to share and take risks, and the intimidation that was felt with new situations.
When teachers requested to see the initial assessment they were surprised to see where they ranked themselves at the beginning of the school year. They compared their initial rankings to the final rankings and remarked about the progress they made. One teacher said, "Yes, the study group met its objectives, and then some. Looking at this assessment, it is beyond what I thought we would accomplish. I am where I hoped to be, but didn’t know if I would actually make it." Another said, "It is fun to see [the self-assessment]. It’s fun to see where I started, but I guess I didn’t realize how far we have come. It’s neat. It’s a celebration!" Yet, another said, "My level of comfort with GR has improved. I am more at ease with taking risks. I am not so caught up in having it not flop. The comfort level is huge and is evidenced in [the self-assessment]."

The fourth benefit was more personal in nature. Through the supported process of a study group, many teachers felt their confidence improved with a growing understanding and time to practice. At the onset, one Southwood teacher said, "I like to be proficient and I feel like I am not. This study group will help." A Hayden teacher confirms this by saying, "My confidence has grown." The teachers’ sense of self-efficacy grew as time passed and led to a sense of empowerment. Another said, "Teaching my first lessons and knowing I could do them was a big success. I knew I could do it." Positive self-talk really emerged with this growing sense of capability. In one Hayden teacher’s words, "I can get this accomplished and I am capable." They became more motivated with an "I can" attitude. The teachers appeared to feel strong and ready to tackle any problems that came their way. Because of this increased confidence, they were able to formulate a strategy or game plan to tackle guided reading
and comprehension strategies in a systematic way. The three Hayden teachers reported being satisfied with the progress they made over the year.

However, at times, some teachers appeared to have more confidence in their peers than in themselves, but reportedly grew more confident as time went on. In reference to her role in the group, one teacher said, “[The study group] is there for me. I am not there for it.” She didn’t feel she was able to offer much to the group, but as time went on, realized the progress she had made and came to terms with this by saying, “Overall, I am seeing improvements in my teaching in every subject because of my involvement in the study group. Because of the things we have done in the guided reading groups, we are taking that to large group and other content areas. I am more aware of how I bring things across the curriculum.” She also stated she was ready for the next round of challenges related to more consistent implementation, flexibility in lesson planning, and starting the students off with guided reading at the onset of the next school year. Another teacher who didn’t feel ready to implement guided reading at the onset, said, “I just had to do it and people helped me along the way. They said, ‘You can do it, you have to do it.’ So, I just had to do it!”

A fifth benefit related to validation. Validation was repeatedly expressed by participants as important to their work in the study group. Teachers wanted to know that they were on the “right track,” as one teacher put it, and know that it was “okay to be where they were at” and not compare themselves to anyone else. Teachers validated each other’s understanding, feelings, and practices. “It was so important that I felt like I was doing okay.” Another reiterated this by saying, “I needed to hear what ideas are going
on out there and to hear I was doing okay.” “When I heard that validation, it made me feel good, because it was like I was doing something right!” One teacher reported, “As the year progressed, I experienced validity whether things did or didn’t work.” This sense of validation has also led to an increased willingness to try new things. “It is going, not without hitches, but it is going! If it doesn’t work, we try something else.” Yet what another teacher said is revealing, “It has been confirming to hear what other people who are starting out are doing. It has also been validating both with success and failure.”

An additional benefit that emerged was relational in nature. Most teachers reported the “togetherness,” the “support of the team”, and the building of “relationships” were a significant “payback” to membership in the study group. The teachers appeared to really appreciate knowing that their peers were “in the same boat”. “Not being alone” was repeatedly shared by participants in the study group. The Hayden teachers referred to the study group as a “safe haven,” where “social connections grew and we were building relationships.” Reportedly, this increased the level of comfort among the group to know that trials and tribulations would be expected and validated.

Teachers reportedly felt this common bond allowed them to commiserate together and also helped them feel supported through the process. Additionally, as they vocalized and welcomed their new appreciation for each other’s thoughts and choices, a respect for diversity emerged. One teacher said, “It is really nice to hear from the mix of teachers in our group. It helps me to keep perspective.” As trust evolved a real sense of synergy emerged as the group members worked together on a common goal. As one Hayden teacher said, “Because of the relationships, collegiality developed that led to a
greater degree of perceived professionalism and a willingness to take risks.” Another talked of how the group evolved support-wise, “It is still a learning group, but it feels more like a support system. But I am still learning. At the beginning, I was just like ‘what do I do, how do I do this. Tell me, tell me, tell me.’ Now, I don’t have so many of those questions, because we have tried it.”

Additionally, several teachers referenced accountability being an outcome of study group participation. They felt this group kept them accountable to work toward the building and district goals in a focused fashion and meet district expectations. There was also a sense they “didn’t want to let other people down” who had also made the commitment. One teacher also said, “I have to hold up my end of the deal.” Another said, “I like change, but it is hard to get out of my comfort zone. I have to push myself to do that. This group helps.” Yet, a Hayden teacher remarked that “[The study group] forced you to stretch outside your box. It wasn’t forced, but there was more accountability.”

Study group challenges. With all professional development, learning opportunities, and groups of people challenges emerge. These study groups were no exception. The members of the group experienced a variety of individual and group challenges that impacted their experience. These challenges were both personal in nature and related to being part of a group. Each member had a different set of circumstances surrounding their level of involvement in the study.

One teacher recalled the initial feeling of “Oh my goodness! It was overwhelming, but not in a negative sense.” A striking comment made by a Hayden
teacher sets the stage for the level of challenges that emerged with new learning and study group involvement:

Challenges... Oh, what wasn’t a challenge! Learning how to do guided reading, learning strategies, implementing it in the room, making groups, changing groups, working with struggling readers, other challenges related to specific readers, teaching decisions, everything! The challenges now aren’t as bad- I am much more prepared. It was ‘baptism by fire’!

Several personal challenges emerged through interviews and observations. These included risk taking, fear of failure or criticism, and meeting individual needs. Among the most common personal challenges was the confidence to take risks. At the onset, several teachers reported a discomfort and unwillingness to take risks related to sharing, trying new things, providing feedback, vocalizing their concerns, and voicing their successes. Several teachers reiterated as their comfort level grew, they became more willing to take risks and made those risks public to others in the group. One Hayden teacher said,

In the beginning I didn’t collaborate much in relation to understandings or ideas because I wasn’t comfortable with what people would say. Now with all of us talking, we are supported. I knew if they suggested something, I could try to do it and even say, ‘What about trying this, and if that doesn’t work, try this’.

This notion of risk taking related to another common feeling among teachers. There was a perception among a few teachers that the group members and any present administrators could have been evaluating their thinking and choices. There was especially a fear of failure and criticism that accompanied the presence of an administrative figure for one teacher. A level of apprehension also related to voicing their concerns. Teachers appeared to feel more comfortable vocalizing concerns related
to students and their teaching, but were less likely to do so about the study group. One Hayden teacher summed it by saying,

> It is easier to analyze and speak up about our teaching and your kids because you are doing it and you know your class best. When you are with your peers and you are trying to figure out the study group, you don’t want to step on toes. We didn’t want to be the one always having the group rescheduled or be the ‘difficult one’. No one wants to be the ‘thorn’ in each other’s side.

Additionally, due to the teacher’s various backgrounds and levels of experience, a few teachers were not satisfied that their group was best meeting their needs. While they admitted significant benefits of being involved in the study group, concern still existed that they weren’t maximizing their learning time, as they occasionally rehashed information in which they already felt competent. One teacher was resigned to the fact that “[The study group] isn’t going to focus just around my needs.”

A set of challenges related to being a part of a group emerged from many teacher’s comments in interviews and through study group sessions. These group challenges were related to time, commitment, focus, group dynamics, personalities of group members, and continuity.

> “Time, time, time!” was a quote from a frustrated teacher, but also reiterated by nearly all of the group members. Time proved to be the largest hindrance for these teachers, but preferences related to time were very personal and varied. Time was referenced in four different ways.

The first was in relation to collaborative activities such as planning, preparing, and implementing together. One teacher said, “I don’t think there is ever enough time to
collaborate. I’d like more, ideally. But at the same time, we collaborate as much as we can. Time is the issue. Where else would we get the time?”

The second time reference related to scheduling of study groups, outside and unexpected conflicts that influenced group time, and also included frequency of meeting, length of meetings, and punctuality. Schedules and lack of time were two of the biggest reported factors to “bog down the study group.” Related to this was the concern for continuity achieved by members attending the study group sessions, although both groups had consistent attendance by all members.

Third, time also encompassed student needs, the content focus at a particular time in the school year, and what the district expectations and focuses were at a given time of the year. The teachers felt these issues impacted the time they had to concentrate on, prepare for, and spend time in the study group.

Lastly, time was referred to in terms of making changes, feeling comfortable, and risk taking. Teachers needed time to grow comfortable with ideas, situations, new learning, and teaching applications. They grew to realize substantial change would not occur overnight and there were no quick fixes.

There was an overwhelming sense that teachers couldn’t afford to waste their time, because it is so limited and precious. Fortunately, teachers at Hayden felt their study group was “as effective as it could have been”. One teacher followed up with, “It wasn’t a time-waster. If it was, we wouldn’t have come.” This idea of maximizing time related to the next challenge.
The second largest group concern and challenge for teachers was time on task and the focus of the group. Many teachers were very concerned about digressions that could lead teachers off the path they were focused on. There was the utmost concern that they themselves or other members of their group couldn’t stay focused. Throughout the study group sessions, tangents occurred, but many other teachers were able to guide the group back to where it needed to go. A few of the teachers reported that they felt it was the role of the facilitator, reading teacher, or principal to really ensure time on task. As an observer, it was clear how teachers “tuned out” when certain individuals “rambled on” about seemingly unrelated topics.

An additional challenge was balancing the level of commitment to the study group with all of their other teaching responsibilities, family life, and outside activities. A fear existed among a few Hayden teachers that this would be “just one more thing”. They were most concerned about keeping the responsibilities and workload light enough to stay committed, but heavy enough to be meaningful. One Southwood teacher said, “If I commit myself to try and understand, I know that leads to better conversation.” In regards to commitment, all three Hayden teachers stated that commitment was what kept them involved, even during those times when they were very overwhelmed. In fact, direct quotes included, “I had said ‘yes’ [to the study group] and I don’t like to quit anything.” Another said, “You don’t say you are going to do something and then not do it.”

The next largest concern on behalf of teachers related to personalities of group members and their associated personal agendas. In interviews, many teachers voiced
their concern about purposes for other member’s participation. Some teachers also had a
difficult time with those members who at times appeared moody or abrasive. This led to
another concern shared by several members about the dynamics of the group. Teachers
mentioned interruptions as a concern, but also the domination of discussion by certain
others members, which took a significant part of the group’s time. At times, history
between teachers or grade levels emerged through conversations in the study group that
created what appeared to be moments of tenseness, but were quickly worked through.

Teachers as Study Group Members

As data was analyzed, many patterns emerged about teachers. These patterns
related to their perceived roles and characteristics, the emotions they felt, the needs they
have as adult learners, and the goals they have set for themselves.

Teacher roles and characteristics. Although it was difficult for teachers to
initially identify, teachers felt they had many roles in the study group. The majority of
teachers felt it was their primary responsibility to be an active participant and learner, to
listen, and to support or encourage peers. Most teachers were active in ways comfortable
to them and some teachers took more initiative than others. From an observer’s
perspective, the support provided to each other often included more empathizing and
commiserating than outright encouragement.

Other roles that surfaced through interviews were being positive, sharing ideas,
and questioning. Ironically, study group members were inherently positive about being a
member of a study group, the benefits of participating, and the process they go through,
but didn’t appear as positive in regards to their own teaching, attempts, or successes.
When referencing their teaching, it appeared quite difficult for most teachers to talk about what they did well, what they accomplished, or what was successful.

Interestingly, the Hayden study group participants were comfortable with one person taking the role as the facilitator, while the Southwood study group shared the responsibility of facilitating. One Southwood teacher said, “You learn through the role of leading.” Although the group at Hayden had predetermined reading for sessions, the facilitator led during most sessions. Members of both groups reported feeling comfortable with the level and type of facilitation present in their group.

The teachers who chose to be a part of the study groups shared their perceptions of themselves as learners. They felt they were professionals, first and foremost, and held the same regard for their colleagues. Many also felt they were lifelong learners with a curiosity to know more and try more.

Teacher emotions. Through interviews and observations, several emotions teachers felt emerged in different circumstances. The dominant emotions were categorized into feelings of being 1) overwhelmed, 2) confused and frustrated, 3) insecure and worried, and 4) energized and empowered.

Teachers most often felt besieged by going through the change process of new learning, planning, implementing, and evaluating. They felt it to be overwhelming when they looked at the big picture of what their study group was trying to accomplish. A Southwood teacher said, “When you look how you do things and try to change, it is so overwhelming. I can’t do it all, so now I am just going to try one strategy.” Many teachers also felt snowed under as they began to make plans for implementation in their
classroom. One teacher reflected back to the early days of the study group and said, “In the beginning I was scared, because it was so new and I was trying to get things organized. It was so overwhelming. It still is overwhelming, but much more manageable and easier to do.” Another said, “The idea of fitting in all the components of the literacy curriculum is overwhelming. I am still trying to figure out how guided reading fits in to the curriculum. [Guided reading] is overwhelming in and of itself. We just don’t have enough time in the day.” Yet another teacher echoed that same sentiment, “Guided reading would be so overwhelming with no study group.”

Many teachers also recalled professional development and being inundated. They felt that too much information was placed on them or too many initiatives were trying to be put in place. A Southwood teacher said, “First they want us to do guided reading. Then they want us to do journals. Then centers. We are in there trying to do it, but what were we really doing? It was too fast.” A colleague followed up by saying, “One time you are learning about one thing and the next time something else. Can’t we just get good at one thing before we move on to the next?”

Teachers also reported feeling confused and frustrated when they looked at all the information they were sorting through and tried to gain a clearer understanding. Because teachers had their own preconceived ideas and understandings, as they worked through a shared understanding of the topic at hand, they were occasionally puzzled and a growing frustration developed at times. Teachers also felt frustrated when their attempts to implement guided reading or comprehension strategies didn’t go as planned. However, through the months together, members of both study groups concluded part of the
learning was "trying and retrying" and that "things don't always go as planned, but that is how you learn." Additional outside sources of pressure also frustrated teachers, not only as more district and building requirements were expected as the year progressed, but also with the aforementioned challenges that emerged with classroom life and one's own personal life.

At the onset of both groups, there appeared to be an overall sense of worry on the part of most participants. One teacher remembers, "At the beginning I was so worried about everything, from what kids were doing [in the rest of the classroom] and here with me." As they attempted something new to them, they felt insecure in their capabilities to master the tasks at hand. Teachers admitted not feeling comfortable sharing ideas initially because "other people have more knowledge than I do" and the fear of "what they would think of me." Additionally, when they looked at where they were in comparison to experienced teachers, a self-reported sense of inadequacy emerged, leading them to worry about their capabilities.

Despite the seemingly negative feelings participants had, the feelings were all countered as they worked through things together. Eventually, teachers began to acknowledge their knowledge and comfort with guided reading and comprehension strategies had grown, although not to the level they had anticipated. One Southwood teacher said, "I learned some [things]. I won't say a lot yet. But I am much more comfortable with things". The "aha's" became more frequent as learning became more ingrained and connections from professional development at the district and building
levels melded with the learnings from the study group. One group talked about the clarity gained from a new understanding about inferring.

Through their successful attempts at implementation and after seeing measurable growth in their students learning, confidence and a sense of empowerment emerged. One teacher said, "This study group motivated me to read more, learn more, and try more." They appeared to collectively be ready to tackle more obstacles and try new things. The groups began to really become productive through use of ideas from professional literature and application to their classroom. Just as importantly, they began to feel a sense of validation for the efforts. They felt like the work they were doing was paying off and they were all experiencing success together.

**Teacher preferences.** Through interviews and observations, teachers identified things important to them in the study group. First, teachers continuously wanted to take away practical applications from the study group. They expected that through their ongoing participation, more ideas to implement in their classroom would be available. Many ideas came from other teachers in their buildings, experts, videos, and the group members themselves. Many of the substantial ideas shared and implemented were from professional readings. Regardless of the source of information, teachers were eager for new ideas.

Practical application was also corroborated on feedback cards from 9 of 11 sessions and ranked as one of the top three coded responses for all three Hayden teachers. Practical application proved to be of most importance to the teachers, as they attempted
to implement something new in their classroom. Examples of teacher responses about practical application included, “Use the paragraph shrinking idea”, “Use running records and analyze errors routinely”, or “Try determining importance graphic organizers shared today”. Teachers repeatedly expressed the desire to share and modify ideas that could readily be applied to the classroom. These findings were congruent with those of the interviews and observations of the study groups.

Second, teachers also wanted to be pushed to the “next level”. They wanted to be better teachers. Many teachers appreciated the accountability that came with membership in a group, as they perceived it would help them go to the “next level” of understanding and subsequently, teaching. Because of that desire to move forward and be more accountable, they asked more questions to clarify and expand their understanding, as well as solicit advice. They worked hard to try new things and make changes to old or ineffective practices. Teachers also began to reflect more and that reflective thinking was evident in their discussions.

Third, teachers wanted to feel comfortable within their study groups and with their learning. Many significant references were made in both interviews and in study groups that reflected this desire for comfort. Teachers wanted to be comfortable as a member of the study group. They also wanted to be comfortable with the content of guided reading and comprehension strategies, and to be comfortable enough to try things and try them again if needed. Teachers also expressed the importance of having comfortable personal relationships with their peers and that there was a reciprocal relationship built on trust and respect. Teachers also wanted to feel comfortable sharing
ideas in an environment that encouraged sharing, risk taking, and validated the efforts of those involved. Lastly, teachers wanted to feel comfortable demonstrating their teaching and being observed, but recognized the struggles each of them had with that type of perceived evaluative situation.

Fourth, several teachers in Southwood interviews and study group sessions remarked about their wish to talk with, collaborate with, and get to know teachers from other grade levels. They had a real desire for inter-grade connectivity. One teacher shared the importance of this by saying, “It was a springboard for us to answer questions with opportunities to hear from others in the district and other grade levels.” Several teachers at the Southwood study group expressed an interest in having all grade levels represented in their study group.

Many Hayden teachers saw the value in teachers of various grade levels being a part of the group in order to have a better understanding of the grade level expectations, especially those grades below and above themselves. The teachers really felt it depended on the purpose. They knew the dynamics and focus of the group would change and reported their being a member of a “like group”. Additionally, some teachers felt by having more grades represented, a higher degree of building camaraderie would develop. A Southwood teacher said, “Conversations in our building [could] make everyone move in the same direction.” Two teachers reported frustration that there were those in the building and district who were unwilling to join this type of group to better themselves. They felt that “everyone [at their study group] was a professional” and would like to extend that to include more teachers.
Fifth, teachers reported their need for a great deal of flexibility and choice in their study group. Many preferred the informality of this type of professional development. It appeared that the idea of formalizing the study group meant they would lose the flexibility to best meet their needs and wouldn’t be able to make changes. The teachers felt a sense of ownership and control over this type of professional development.

Lastly, most teachers wanted to have their principals and reading specialists be involved in the study group. Most felt it wasn’t necessary for the principal to be a full-fledged member, but that “checking in” to create an awareness of teacher activity was important. They also felt the principal should be aware of the happenings in the study group and be able to supply resources and needed support to the teachers. A few suggested it would be valuable to have their principal as an active member of the study group. Most teachers also believed it was important for the reading specialist to be involved actively in the study groups, if not facilitating it. They believed the reading specialist had a different set of expertise that could be helpful. They also wanted the reading specialist to share ideas and resources with them.

Additionally, all of the teachers expressed the desire to keep learning. In fact, many had already formulated goals for the upcoming school year as it related to guided reading and comprehension strategies. One teacher’s goals related to being more confident as a guided reading teacher, to become more flexible within guided reading, and to increase her willingness to try things. Another teacher said she hoped to be teaching guided reading more consistently, to expand past the “tunnel vision” when planning, and become more comfortable with the books and strategies. Yet, another
teacher shared that through continued practice and implementation, the learning would continue. The Hayden group concluded that despite next year’s professional development focus being split between comprehension strategies and the already overwhelming math adoption, they all intended to continue moving forward with guided reading. One Hayden teacher said, “We have laid a very good foundation for guided reading.” Another followed up by saying, “I don’t want to give that up.”

Student Learning

Student learning through improved teaching. While effective teaching was in the forefront, it was considered a vehicle to student learning. Throughout the course of both study groups and individual and group interviews, student learning was a driving force for teacher discussion and focus. “Student learning is the goal. We want our readers to be better comprehenders,” said one Southwood teacher. Another teacher said, “[Study groups] led to conversation about kids, which is a positive effect.” This student learning focus was present at the onset of both study groups and continued through the duration of the groups. Often times there were references of student application, student successes, student struggles, student work, and the best interest of the students.

The teachers in these study groups clearly identified their intent to improve student learning through improved teaching. One teacher said, “If the study group is what I hope it to be, then the things I am learning there and bringing back to the classroom and implement effectively, should help their reading. That is my hope. If it
doesn’t, then it is wasting my time.” Another said of the study group, “There should be no excuse why the study group wouldn’t led to change in instructional practice” and subsequently, student learning.

Teachers whole-heartedly believed that improvements they made to their teaching as a result of the study group involvement, led to improved student learning. In fact, a group of Hayden teachers had experienced a shared professional development experience the day before a study group session in which they became more aware of the need to be purposeful in their choices. During this particular study group session, the following mantra emerged: “Know your purpose. Know your purpose. Know your purpose.” The teachers really began to become more conscious and purposeful as they reflected on theory, their instructional decisions, and the impact and relevance to their students.

There was a sense among teachers that if they were better prepared to teach guided reading and comprehension strategies, that the students would be better prepared to learn. One teacher questioned, “If [the study group] is not good for kids, why would we be doing it?” Teachers repeatedly made the connection of how intertwined student learning is with the quality instruction they provided. Teachers recognized the impact of their own learning, changes, and application to the students and classroom.

The feedback cards also corroborated the teacher’s ongoing focus of “students first”. Student were also focused on in feedback cards from 8 of 11 sessions, with student learning being of more of a focus of the seasoned teachers and student engagement being focused on more by the first year teacher. Examples of student learning in the reflections
included, “Guided reading is really guided thinking. Guided reading gives support to the reader.” Another included, “Have kids share what they feel the definition is in their own words,” or “Be sure to validate what is important to students,” or, “Guide them based on listening to their ideas.” Teachers believed by consciously acknowledging the student’s voice, that it would increase student engagement, and further foster student learning.

**Student engagement.** Student motivation and engagement was in the forefront of many student-centered conversations during the study groups, but also emerged during the interviews. One Hayden teacher reported that as a result of guided reading, “The kids are really excited- everything is heightened. They are engaged and don’t want to quit. They really want to finish it! There is a hook I have created.” The teachers of the Hayden study group discussed the impact motivation had on student learning and how teacher effectiveness influences that and led one teacher to say, “We have made things more interesting based on the things other people have shared.”

**Student assessment.** Throughout the study groups, the concern about whether “[students] get it” pervaded the conversation. By “get it”, teachers were referring to how they know students were taking away the intended learning. Teachers concluded that in addition to assessments and observations, their intuition would help them to know if students are attaining the desired learning. Through both interviews and observations of the study groups, it became very apparent that all teachers involved were motivated to participate in the study group to improve their teaching, so they could better prepare their students.
In an effort to see if students did "get it", assessment of student learning and teacher instruction became very prevalent among the conversations. One teacher reported, "I'm assessing my teaching and as a result, I am making more decisions and making more changes to the groups" that impact student learning. "I also look at the data and their writing, then make instructional decisions based on their performance. It is better than when I first started out." Another teacher said of her teaching, "I assess my teaching through student learning. When I see [student] growth and that the students are engaged, it is easy to assess my teaching. It is also constant feedback from the students that you have to consider for teaching effectiveness." Teachers really expressed the desire for standards and practical ways to measure student growth. They worked to identify methods of assessment that would drive instructional decisions. For example, at the end of the first session at Southwood, the teachers expressed the need for practical ways to assess student's use of a particular comprehension strategy. They wanted to develop their own rubric for each strategy, but eventually the Language Arts Coordinator provided the teachers with a few examples of assessment tools that met their purposes.

Student assessment was only present in feedback cards from 4 of 11 sessions, but was of heavier concern toward the end of the sessions. Reflections related to student assessment included, "I learned how to assess and differentiate between MSV [meaning, structure, and visual cues] errors in running records", "Running records will be a valuable resource", or "How do you assess or grade [the work] they are doing?"

**Student success.** Student success also pervaded many conversations in study groups. Helping their students to meet an increased standard of learning was a priority.
One Hayden teacher said, “The biggest success besides implementing guided reading, was learning the value of it [for students].” Another Hayden teacher shared with pride, “In student learning, I am noticing confidence, especially those students who didn’t have the confidence in reading before. My struggling readers still struggle, but they have so much confidence in themselves. And they are baby steps. They are huge celebrations for those kids. I take pride in that.” Later on in the year, this same teacher focused on a specific student “who wouldn’t say a peep. He was a special kid. Because of guided reading, working in the small group, and one-to-one with him at his instructional level, he was more free to take risks. The risk taking increased in one-to-to teaching, guided reading, and in whole class. It even carried over into his writing.” Another Hayden teacher reflected on a few student successes. “[She] was more excited. She didn’t have the highest skill level in her class, but her confidence improved.” This teacher also went on to talk about another student who “had done an exceptional job focusing more on her reading as a critical thinker and was a better writer” because of the focus on writing tied to guided reading.

**Student variability.** Of great concern to many Hayden teachers, was the variety of students learning needs. Through much discussion in the study groups, they focused energies on how to best reach students and the challenges of providing responsive instruction. Many conversations in the study groups and interview segments demonstrated the ongoing concern for pushing their own students to the “next level”. Through conversations related to challenges in the classroom and with special students, the teachers really used the study group as a forum for problem solving.
Guided Reading and Comprehension Strategies

There was a sense among the group that guided reading and comprehension strategies were considered best practice. One Southwood teacher said, "It doesn’t matter to me [how we do it], as long as we are teaching them the strategies and supporting their learning." Many teachers expressed the value that guided reading and comprehension strategies offers students. A Hayden teacher said, "The study group could have been one more thing we had to do, but we see the value in learning about [guided reading and comprehension strategies].

Although they all recognized much growth will still take place, all of the Hayden teachers felt they had made significant growth in their knowledge base, experience, and comfort level with guided reading and comprehension strategies. Several remarks showed the value teachers placed on the practices of guided reading and comprehension strategies. A Hayden teacher said, "There are things you put time into and don’t get anything back, wondering what the value is in it. But there is great value in learning about guided reading." Another reluctant teacher said, "In the beginning, I was skeptical about guided reading. I was concerned how everyone would learn something if I wasn’t working with them. Now, I see there is growth [experienced by the students]. I had very limited knowledge of guided reading and I had a little box of information, but now that box has expanded. I am trying to make guided reading more of a priority and have many goals in place."

The following anecdotal reflections confirmed the impact the study group had on these particular members and the growth that occurred. Teachers valued the content
focus of the group related to guided reading and comprehension strategies and agreed
their growth was maximized by the study group. One Hayden teacher said,

Guided reading would not look like it does now without the support of the study
group. I don’t think I would have felt supported without the study group. I
wouldn’t have been able to take back those neat ideas to try out on the kids. I
don’t think without those experiences I would be the guided reading teacher that I
am now. All of those experiences have helped to shape and mold who I am as a
teacher and how I teach those kids.

Another Hayden teacher said,

Guided reading would definitely not look like it does now without the support of
[the] study group. The study group gave [me] moral support. It would still be in
place, but I wouldn’t have had that resource, the people in the group, the materials
in the group, the examples from the group, and experiences shared. I wouldn’t
have had the accountability to the group. It might have been in place, but I don’t
know how it could have been.

As the teachers at Hayden, especially, became more familiar and comfortable
with the tenets of guided reading, the focus gradually shifted to comprehension strategies.
The comprehension strategies were identified as specific procedures that guided students
to become more aware of how well they were comprehending as they read and write
(National Institute for Literacy, 2001). The comprehension strategies the study groups
focused on included using Schema, Determining Importance, Visualizing, Questioning,
Inferring, Clarifying, and Synthesizing.

Although a heavier focus on comprehension strategies emerged as the sessions
went on at Hayden, strategies were reflected on feedback cards from 10 of 11 sessions.
The comprehension strategies were the teaching focus they had ingrained into their
guided reading lessons. As their knowledge of comprehension strategies grew, their
reflections demonstrated the growth. Examples of related comments included, “How do
you know what strategies to focus on?" "Know your text and be sure the text lends itself
to the strategy you are focusing on", "Guided reading has a primary [role] to help develop
student strategies." Some responses related to specific strategies, such as "I'm realizing I
can use a book for inferring, but not just focus on inferring." Others included,
"Comprehension strategies can be used and taught simultaneously" or "Synthesis should
be done in a way that makes sense without telling too much information."

Despite these strong feelings of support and validation of guided reading and
comprehension strategies, many challenges emerged related to guided reading in the
teacher's classrooms. Due to the complexities within guided reading, there were many
decisions that need to be mapped out to best meet the needs of the students and the
teacher. Logistics and management of guided reading were focused on in feedback cards
from 9 of 11 sessions. Unfortunately, no one guided reading system works for any
teacher, so often times the teachers inquired about and shared ideas related to logistics
and management of guided reading in their classroom.

Although many ideas were shared and ideas tried, conversations left them
wondering how to take guided reading to the next level by working through logistical and
management issues. Examples of such reflections included, "Put notes at the top of the
lesson plan with all materials you need," or "How do I keep my lessons organized- by
strategy or book level?", or "Are six students too many for one group?" Some
comments on the feedback cards indicated the teachers' growing understanding of the
flexibility that accompanies the logistics and management of guided reading. Such
comments included "I need a better schedule for my groups," or "I have seen different kinds of lesson plans, now I can choose which one to try," or "Find what works for you", or "You can choose the focus of what you want or need to do with a group or book."

The summary and implications of these findings will be further discussed in Chapter V, Discussion.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study was designed to explore teacher perceptions about the efficacy of study groups as a means for effective professional development. The four questions this study addressed related to teacher perceptions about the effects of study group participation on teacher practice and student learning, as well as characteristics of effective study groups and obstacles hindering their effectiveness. The responses to these four questions will be contextualized within the discussion and implications sections.

Discussion of Findings

Professional Development

Both the existing professional literature and the findings of this study indicated similarities in teachers' priorities about effective professional development. Specifically, Hayden and Southwood teachers considered the following elements of professional development to be of utmost importance: relevance; collaboration; practical application; shared goals; common vision; and a focus on student learning through improved and purposeful teaching. Teachers also had distinct learning preferences that aligned with the tenets of constructivism. These included active, hands-on learning opportunities; collaboration; and visual support through modeling and concrete examples (Lyons & Pinnell, 2004; Richardson, 2003; Rock & Wilson, 2005; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Kinnucan-Welsch et al., 2006). Hayden and Southwood teachers indicated they wanted their professional development and study group involvement to push them to the “next
level.” Teachers expected their involvement to markedly impact their teaching and subsequently, student learning.

Hayden and Southwood teachers also indicated the need for support through all four levels of Joyce and Shower’s (1995) gradual release model. The gradual release model included theory, demonstration, practice, and coaching. However, while teachers wanted theory and research tied into their study as a basis for growth, they often reported feeling overwhelmed by that very same theory and research. Teachers felt they lacked the “theoretical perspective” to appreciate the information that was forthcoming, but benefited from sharing through discussion and interpretation of theory and research.

Teachers were in agreement that modeling through demonstrations, videos, and other concrete examples provided them access into how guided reading and comprehension strategy instruction should “look.” Teachers stressed the importance of having a visual in their mind.

Interestingly, while Hayden and Southwood teachers reported wanting the level of ongoing support identified by Joyce and Showers (1995), they felt the level of support provided by the study group was adequate to meet their current needs. Many teachers acknowledged the value of having their teaching observed, along with ongoing coaching, but vocalized their own discomfort with someone observing their teaching.

Little existing research came forth to support teachers’ preferences about professional development facilitators. However, Hayden and Southwood teachers identified the following facilitator characteristics as necessary to professional
development, as well as study groups: knowledgeable and have expertise; flexible and attentive; and good-natured and personable.

Study Groups

Characteristics of study groups proved to be an area common to both the existing professional literature and this study. Many of the findings from this study supported the efficacy of study groups. In general, effective study groups were collaborative in nature, had shared goals, and supported classroom instruction (Birchak, et al., 1998; Cramer et al., 1996; King, 2001; Lyons & Pinnell, 2004; Roberts & Pruitt, 2005; Rock & Wilson, 2005; Tichenor & Heins, 2000).

Additionally, Hayden and Southwood teachers identified further characteristics of effective study groups. These characteristics included the group being on task, with a shared focus that was aligned with building and district professional development initiatives. Effective study groups were also flexible and allowed teachers the choice and autonomy they desired, which reportedly led to a sense of empowerment.

The existing professional literature revealed three overarching purposes for study groups, which were fostering innovation implementations, collaboration, and the guided study of relevant research (Birchak et al., 1998; Cramer et al., 1996; Florio-Ruane & Raphael, 2001; Lick, 2000; Lyons & Pinnell, 2004; Sweeney, 2003; Tichenor & Heins, 2000). While these purposes existed in both Hayden and Southwood study groups, teachers also revealed the three greatest tasks the study group lent itself to were sharing and modifying ideas; problem solving and inquiry; and dialogue and support through collaboration.
**Outcomes.** Collaboration emerged as a primary outcome of study groups in the existing literature (Birchak et al., 1998; Cramer et al., 1996; Dearman & Alber, 2005; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Friend, 2000; Howland & Picciotto, 2003; Inger, 1993; Joyce & Showers, 1996; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Shellard, 2004; Wheelock, 2000). Teachers in this study confirmed that study groups were a forum for collaboration and as a result, their understandings grew as they formulated and tested ideas. Hayden and Southwood teachers corroborated existing research (Florio-Ruane & Raphael, 2001; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Wheelock, 2000) suggesting collaboration extended outside the study group. However, one key finding emerged which indicated that teachers felt collaboration was indeed important and was identified as such by administrators and professional development facilitators, but was not fostered to the degree they felt would benefit them in their building or district.

The existing professional literature also indicated reflection was an outcome of study groups (Joyce & Showers, 1996; King, 2001; Petzko, 2004). The teachers in this study agreed. However, the existing literature indicated that reflection should occur on readings, curriculum, discussions, the classroom, and teaching. While that is ideal and comprehensive, the teachers in this study felt they most often only reflected on their teaching and student learning. Few teachers indicated conscious reflection of theory and research, unless they were engaged in conversation about it.

Validation appeared through this study as an additional key outcome for study group members. Teachers needed to know they were “doing okay” in their efforts. They were vocal about their need to “not be alone” in their new teaching endeavors and
appreciated having others to commiserate with who understood what they were experiencing. Through this common bond of being “in the same boat”, teachers believed they developed relationships that might not have otherwise evolved in this capacity.

Additionally, Hayden and Southwood teachers overwhelmingly remarked about the sense of accountability the study group provided them. Teachers felt the study group helped them to stay focused on and work toward district and building goals with an ongoing level of support. As a result, the teachers reported an increased level of obligation to peers who committed to the group. This commitment led to more active involvement in the study group.

The existing literature also indicated that growth in confidence was a byproduct of study group involvement (Cramer et al, 1996; Florio-Ruane & Raphael, 2001; Shellard, 2003). Teachers in this study concurred, but elaborated even further. They felt when they became more confident with their new knowledge and proficiency in application, a sense of empowerment emerged that energized them for more challenges and changes within their teaching.

**Barriers.** Through examination of the literature, many barriers to effective study groups were cited. It should be noted, however, that during the course of the study group sessions, many teachers overcame these barriers. In effect, while initially seen as barriers, they became positive outcomes. These barriers included a lack of teacher choice, varying personalities of study group members, new memberships, the principal’s involvement, participants lacking a theoretical background, and a host of logistical challenges (Birchak et al., 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Dearman & Alber, 2005; Frey & Fisher, 2004;
Lick, 2000; Martin-Kniep, 2004; Morrow & Casey, 2004; Murphy & Lick, 2005; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Rock & Wilson, 2005; Sweeney, 2003; Wheelan, 2005; Wheelock, 2004). Hayden and Southwood teachers confirmed many of those barriers, but also identified additional ones they felt impacted their study group involvement. Personal challenges included a lack of confidence and often feeling overwhelmed with both the study group and professional development. Additional barriers included fear of risk taking, fear of failure or criticism, and the group not meeting their individual needs.

Although the literature cited many challenges common to group dynamics, the emphasis on time was minimal in comparison to the emphasis placed on it by members of this study. Time was the biggest challenge reported for all involved. Reference to time included time to collaborate, time in terms of scheduling and conflicts, time of the year and curricular emphasis for teachers, as well as time to feel comfortable, take risks, and make changes.

Teachers Perceptions Regarding Study Groups

Overall, the existing literature lent itself to positive generalizations about study groups and their efficacy, as well as professional development. On the whole, research overlooked teacher perceptions on a variety of fronts. According to the current research, many strengths lie in study groups (Birchak, et al., 1998; Cramer et al., 1996; King, 2001; Lyons & Pinnell, 2004; Murphy & Lick, 2005; Roberts & Pruitt, 2005; Rock & Wilson, 2005; Sweeney, 2003; Taylor et al., 2002; Tichenor & Heins, 2000), however teacher’s corroboration of that was limited. Through this study, teachers had opportunities to
describe and explain their perceptions on new learning and their roles in the study group, as well as their emotions and preferences.

**New learning.** Contemporary literature provided evidence that teachers increased their learning through study group involvement (Birchak et al., 1998; Cramer et al. 1996; Lyons & Pinnell, 2004; King, 2001; Richardson, 2003; Rock & Wilson, 2005). However, the literature did not go into detail about the types of learning teachers felt they gained. Hayden and Southwood teachers reported that their new learning led to a deeper understanding of the material, which in turn led to changes in practice, further understanding, and growth in perspectives. As time went on, they reported a growing appreciation for the various perspectives that accompanied the discussion of theory and practice, which evolved due to the development of shared understanding through their discussions. Hayden teachers believed that reading permeated all curriculum areas, and so their newfound learning also carried over to those curriculum areas both in their teaching and their students’ learning.

**Roles in the study group.** Hayden and Southwood teachers reported having a difficult time identifying their roles in the study group. Collectively, they believed many of the former professional development experiences they had left them feeling they didn’t have an active role in their learning. Conversely, they believed that success of their study group was dependent upon their active membership. Nearly all teachers reported that being an active learner was their chief role. They also believed it was
important for them to be solid listeners, provide ongoing support, and to inquire about theory and practice. Lastly, they believed that sharing ideas was a central element of the study group, and subsequently, it was their responsibility to provide ideas.

Emotions. As with any new learning, teachers experienced a variety of reported “ups and downs”. However, the existing literature provided insufficient information about teacher’s reactions to study group events or when going through changes. During this study group process, Hayden and Southwood teachers reported a surge of variant emotions that provided challenges to them, but also “sparked their jets”.

Many teachers indicated they were overwhelmed at the thought of change in general, professional development initiatives, additional external pressures, study group expectations, and the content of guided reading and comprehension strategies. Teachers also reported feeling confused and frustrated with new information and, even more so, when attempts at practice were perceived to be failures. Teachers also shared that they were insecure and worried about a host of things, including colleagues’ perceptions of them, their own perceived sense of inadequacy, and logistical and management elements of their teaching.

However, despite all of these seemingly negative emotions, teachers reported a feeling of energy and empowerment through the study group process. Positivity emerged as teachers acknowledged their growth and capabilities and became more confident, as well as through their growing sense of the value of guided reading and comprehension strategies and their effects on student learning.
Preferences. As with any adult learning, teacher's preferences emerged. The findings from this study were applicable and correlated with the research on adult learning (Cramer et al., 1996; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Knowles, 1980). For study groups to best meet their needs, Hayden and Southwood teachers indicated they appreciated the flexibility and choice a study group offered. They especially valued the control and self-directed nature of the study group. They also expressed the need for practical application and relevance to their teaching.

Additionally, Hayden and Southwood teachers referred to being “comfortable”. Comfort became a theme that resonated in several elements of this study. Teachers desired comfort within their study group and with their peers, as well as with learning, risk taking, applications, and make changes. Reluctant as some teachers were, the majority of teachers indicated the desire to be more comfortable with observation of their teaching and ongoing coaching, recognizing the value it brought to their own professional development.

While existing research indicated that principal involvement in a study group can be perceived as both a benefit and a hindrance (Birchak et al., 1998), teachers in the study groups indicated the desire for their principal’s involvement on a variety of levels. With the exception of one teacher, Hayden and Southwood teachers wanted their principals to be actively involved, cognizant of their efforts toward improvement, and provide various levels of support to them. Additionally, teachers expressed interest in having access to the expertise of reading specialists in their literacy-based study groups.
Student Learning

Throughout the review of the literature, it became abundantly clear that the intent behind study groups was to fuel student learning. However, little research was found that actually substantiated whether or how student learning is truly impacted by teacher involvement in study groups, other than broad generalizations. Although this study didn’t directly address student learning, teachers referenced it in several ways. Teachers acknowledged that their improved teaching as a result of the study group would lead to increased student learning and achievement. Through the study groups, teachers holistically focused on the best interests of students through the following areas related to student learning: classroom application; student success, variability, struggles, engagement and motivation; and assessment of student growth.

Implications

Student learning proved to be at the heart of Hayden and Southwood teachers’ efforts to improve their teaching. The ultimate goal to improve their professional development stemmed from the desire for enhanced student learning. These teachers clearly felt the study group was a key way to foster their learning and improving student achievement.

There is an overwhelming amount of existing research to support study groups as a means of effective professional development, which indicates administrators and professional development facilitators must focus in more responsive ways to the teachers comprising those study groups. The focus should be on how professional development and study groups best meet the needs of teachers so, in turn, teachers are better prepared
to meet the needs of students. Teachers need to be seen as having a more active role in their professional development with increased opportunities for leadership. Those in charge of professional development must be more in tune to the challenges teachers face and responsive to their needs and preferences. Teachers have deep-seated ideas of what will benefit them as learners and take them to the “next level”, if only those ideas are acknowledged and choices are allowed.

**The Next Level**

Going to the “next level” of teaching was the goal for many Hayden and Southwood teachers who indicated the need for more purposeful teaching with “what, why, and how” in mind. By going to the “next level,” the teachers were certain student learning would be positively impacted. They wanted a common vision that would help them determine “what” practice they should partake in to go to the “next level” of teaching. They expressed the need for a rationale; to know “why” they should go to the “next level” with a given practice. They also wanted to know “how” to get to the “next level”. It is the “what, why, and how” that professional development initiatives must address in a relevant context for teachers to best attain that “next level” of teaching.

This going to the “next level” mentality should drive professional development in both small groups and through buildings and districts. Hayden and Southwood teachers indicated that for them to go to the “next level”, the following must be provided by professional development facilitators and administrators: collaboration, a theoretical perspective, validation, teaching with a greater purpose, and reflection. As suggested by the results of this study, these factors represented the outcomes of solid professional
development and are in turn influenced by the following characteristics of professional development: the levels of comfort teachers feel and confidence, autonomy, relevance of their learning, time, support, focus of the group, and the facilitation of professional development. These spheres of influence to the “next level” are shown in Figure 3.

These spheres of influence will be delved into further. Teachers indicated collaboration was needed to focus on issues of relevance to their teaching and students. Teachers valued the peer relationships that evolved during their study group tenure and the validation that occurred as a result of their study group involvement. Teachers who experienced shared learning in an environment built by trust and rapport, helped teachers build the sense of community they desired. In order to meet the needs of teachers, it then becomes imperative to provide teachers with ample time to collaborate to reflect on and explore new learning, planning, implementing, evaluating, and problem solving. Time must be maximized so they can work smarter together through smaller initiatives such as study groups.

This collaboration can also be fostered within both the building and district levels. This multi-leveled approach to professional development increases the level of support teachers desire, increases relevance of teacher’s professional learning to their teaching, and also provides teachers exposure to more collegial interactions with peers to share ideas and develop professionally together.
A wide range of ongoing support is needed to foster teacher growth. While teachers reported the need for choice and autonomy, they were also cognizant of the framework of support the study group provided them. Hayden and Southwood teachers
indicated that support provided to them during times of new learning increased their comfort level, which impacted their confidence, willingness to take risks, and the level of changes to improve their teaching and student learning. Teachers desired comfort in both the study group process and with the content of the study group. However, one area where teachers were still reluctant was related to coaching and having their teaching observed. Research has demonstrated the value of coaching (Joyce & Showers, 1996a; Sweeney, 2003) and as such, must be instilled within these teachers in a non-threatening manner to help them take their teaching to the next level.

Also of great concern was the notion of teachers being “theoretical.” Teachers must understand the relationship between theory, research, and practice and the value in that relationship. Through the theoretical base, teachers will be able to improve their teaching through relevant application. Hayden and Southwood teachers indicated the desire to use and reflect on theory and research to support their learning and teaching in a collaborative setting.

Hayden and Southwood teachers also indicated that by going to the “next level”, they would in turn push their students to the “next level” through more purposeful teaching. In essence, the study group was seen as a means to an end, with the goal being student learning. A conscious effort must be placed on making decisions in the best interest of the students. As teachers become more confident in the content and increase their awareness about their students’ learning, as well as through the use of ongoing data collection, instructional decisions can be made with the best interest of the students in mind.
Leaders of professional development emerged in two ways. First, teachers clearly expressed interest in having principals and the reading specialists involved in innovative professional development, including their study groups. This reflected the notion that change should come from all levels and that shared leadership is central to the success of literacy initiatives. Second, the importance of the facilitator of professional development and study groups emerged through this study, although little research previously existed. The roles of the facilitator should be considered of great importance and clearly understood, for their involvement can indeed impact the outcome of the intended professional development. Several challenges facilitators face should be brought to the forefront to increase the likelihood of improved professional development.

To summarize, administrators and professional development facilitators must create opportunities for teachers to further collaborate through a shared learning process and create a sense of comfort that leads to increased reflection of theory and research, but also practice. Administrators and professional development facilitators must provide the impetus for teachers to push themselves to the "next level". By addressing the aforementioned suggestions, teachers may become more active in their development, thereby improving their teaching, and most importantly, student learning.

**Areas of Further Exploration**

Information about effective professional development is abundant. Collaboration through the study group was defined as one of the most important outcomes of study group involvement. However, much research is still needed to identify practical ways to increase collaboration time and quality within schools and districts. What can
administrators, professional development facilitators, and teachers themselves do to improve the types of collaboration and increase the amount of time devoted to it?

A related area for further exploration centered on how to help teacher see themselves as “theoretical”. In the words of the District Language Arts Coordinator, “Could it be that when teachers see a practical application [they obtained from research and theory], they ceased to view and think of the idea as theory?” Research should center on teacher perceptions of theory and research, and specifically, why some teachers reported an aversion to theory and research. How can professional development facilitators and administrators foster this notion of the importance of theory and research and the relationship to their practice, as well as increase the comfort level with theory and research?

Contemporary research also indicated the value of coaching. Well-known research by Joyce and Showers (1995) included coaching as a key element of sustaining professional growth and curricular implementation in the classroom. Further research is needed to explore the following questions: Do study groups which do not institute coaching as part of their routine limit the likelihood of change in thinking, and ultimately, their practice? If coaching is considered a best practice in professional development, what changes can be made at the building and district levels to address the logistical challenges and the self-reported barriers which keep teachers from working within a coaching relationship? What are practical ways to increase coaching within a professional development framework that is workable and meaningful to teachers?
Many teachers have often been passive participants through their former professional development opportunities. Study groups were a means to increase the level of activity and control teachers place on their own learning and development. What can be done to further foster the "teacher as leader" philosophy and increase the likelihood of teachers involving themselves professionally in study groups? How can teachers begin to move away from the passive role in professional development and take more charge of their learning? Lastly, how can administrators and professional development facilitators help teachers to see the value of being educational leaders for themselves, their building, and their district?
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

HUMAN PARTICIPANTS REVIEW INFORMED CONSENT

Project Title: Teacher's Perceptions on Professional Study Groups as an Effective Means to Successful Guided Reading Implementation

Name of Investigator(s): Melissa Reimer

You are invited to participate in a research project conducted through the University of Northern Iowa. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision about whether or not to participate.

You are currently participating in a Guided Reading Study Group at Hayden Elementary. Because you are currently participating in such a study group, your participation in this research is being requested.

This research project explores perceptions held by teachers of how their participation in professional study groups impacts their preparation for guided reading instruction in their classroom. Specifically, the following questions are being studied in an effort to determine the effectiveness of professional study groups as a professional development tool.

A. Do teachers believe that professional study groups result in them becoming better guided reading teachers?

B. Do teachers believe that professional study groups result in students becoming better readers?

C. What are characteristics of effective study groups?

D. What obstacles could impede an effective study group?

As you know from your involvement with the study group, you discuss professional readings and share experiences related to guided reading implementation in your room. The study group sessions will be audio recorded. After each study group session, you will be asked to complete a feedback card. At the onset of the study group forming, you will be individually asked to complete an oral interview with the researcher, with a focus on your perceptions about guided reading, professional development, and study groups. Midway, an interview will be conducted with you individually to assess your current perceptions about the effectiveness of the group and how it is assisting you in meeting your professional development needs as it relates to guided reading instruction. At the completion of the study group, you will be individually asked to complete a follow-up oral interview with the researcher, with a focus on your current perceptions about guided reading, professional development, and study groups, as well as your thoughts on your progress and the overall effectiveness of the study group. Your interviews will be recorded. Data will be generated in the form of audio tapes and written reflections. The researcher asks your permission to examine and analyze the data provided in the audio recordings of sessions, interviews, and feedback cards.

This is a voluntary participation opportunity and is not mandated on the part of the University of Northern Iowa or Cedar Falls Community School District. If you choose not to participate,
it will not affect your job or your professional relationship with the researcher. The participants are colleagues of equal stature within the school district and the researcher is not in a supervisory capacity.

**Discomfort and Risks:**
Should you consent to involvement, risks will be minimal. When collaboratively working and learning together, it is assumed there may be a small level of discomfort sharing your thoughts and feelings candidly in a small group. Additional discomfort may occur during observation of you teaching your guided reading lessons.

**Benefits and Compensation:**
Should you agree to participate in the research, it is anticipated that your knowledge and insights about the efficacy of study groups will strengthen. There will be no direct compensation for your involvement in this research.

**Confidentiality:**
Information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept confidential. The summarized findings with no identifying information may be published in an academic journal or presented at a scholarly conference. If research is published, pseudonyms will be used to replace real names. If quotes or summaries of information are used, any identifiers will be changed to protect your identity.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw:** Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from participation at any time or choose not to participate at all, and by doing so, you will not be penalized or lose benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you have questions about the study or desire information in the future regarding your participation or the study generally, you may contact Melissa Reimer at 319.277.0573 or the project investigator’s faculty advisor, Dr. Rick Traw, at the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Northern Iowa 319.273.2167. You may also contact the office of the Human Participants Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, at 319-273-2748, for answers to questions about rights of research participants and the participant review process.

**Agreement:**
I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this project as stated above and the possible risks arising from it. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement. I am 18 years of age or older.

______________________________  ______________________________
(Signature of participant)       (Date)

______________________________  ______________________________
(Printed name of participant)    (Date)

______________________________  ______________________________
(Signature of instructor/advisor) (Date)
APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW GUIDES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Group Pre-Interview (HAYDEN)</th>
<th>Date</th>
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</table>

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**
1. In your mind, what is the role of professional development? How does it look to you?

2. Describe your experiences with prior professional development. What comes to your mind when you hear “professional development”?

3. What were some strengths of your professional development, meaning, effective measures to help you grow as a professional?

4. What were some weaknesses of your professional development?

**STUDY GROUP**
5. Have you been a part of a professional study group before? Please describe your experiences.

6. If yes, how was the group established? Why was it established? How did it operate? How long were you a part of it?

7. How would you describe the ideal study group, in terms of content and logistics.

8. How can a study group be of best support to you now?

9. In addition to a study group, what would be helpful as you grow as an education professional? What other professional development tools would best assist you?

10. What do you feel your role is during the study group?

11. What professional strengths do you feel you offer to study groups?

12. How do you prepare for study group sessions?

13. Describe how you feel after attending a study group session (excited, prepared, overwhelmed, worried).

14. Describe how you feel about a small group professional setting.
15. Who should facilitate study groups?

16. What is the role of the administrator in educational study groups? The role of the reading teacher?

17. What is an appropriate amount of work for a study group?

GUIDED READING

18. What are your personal and professional thoughts about guided reading (GR)?

19. Describe your knowledge base with GR.

20. Describe your exposure/experience with GR.

21. Describe your comfort level with GR.

22. In your first month of school, how would you describe growth in these areas?

23. How do you define successful guided reading implementation?

24. What are some general concerns you have with successfully implementing guided reading?

25. What does the role of guided reading play in your literacy curriculum now? What do you hope it will look like as the year progresses?

26. Besides a study group, what do you think will benefit you most in successful GR implementation?

27. What is your professional goal as it relates to GR?

PERSONAL DATA

1. How long have you been teaching?

2. How would you describe yourself as a learner? How do you think you best learn?

3. What would you like the researcher to know about you as you are followed through the first year of this process?
1. Please describe your experiences as part of the professional study group so far.

2. In your opinion, why was the study group established and what were the objectives? Is the group making progress toward its intended objectives? If not, what improvements could be made to foster effectiveness of the study group?

3. What do you feel your role is during the study group? Have you seen your role change as the group evolved? If so, how?

4. What could the facilitator do to improve the effectiveness of the study group?

5. What could the participants do to improve the effectiveness of the study group?

6. How would you describe the expectations of this study group in terms of responsibilities, logistics, and content? What would be an ideal commitment?

7. Describe how you generally feel after attending a study group session (e.g., excited, prepared, overwhelmed, worried).

8. What things do you feel have bogged down this study group? What are some of the pitfalls of this type of professional development? What suggestions do you have to address these?

9. Do you feel this study group has been able to successfully continue in spite of the challenges or impediments?

10. What successes do you feel this study group has experienced?

11. What personal successes do you feel you have experiences thus far?
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
1. Describe your experiences with professional development this year.

2. How has your view of professional development changed over the course of the year?

3. What were some strengths of your professional development this year, meaning, effective measures that helped you grow as a professional?

4. What were some weaknesses of your professional development this year?

STUDY GROUP
5. Please describe your experiences this year as part of a professional study group.

6. What were the objectives of the study group? Did it meet its intended objectives?

7. What did you feel your role was during the study group? Did you see your role change as the group evolved? If so, how?

8. What professional strengths do you feel you brought to this study group?

9. How would you describe the expectations of this study group in terms of responsibilities, logistics, and content?

10. Describe how you felt after attending a study group session (e.g., excited, prepared, overwhelmed, worried). Did this change as you met more with the study group? What do you attribute that change to?

11. What were the strengths of your study group?

12. What things bogged down your study group? What are some of the pitfalls of this type of professional development?

13. Do you feel this study group was able to successfully continue in spite of the challenges or impediments?
GUIDED READING

14. What are your overall current personal and professional thoughts about guided reading (GR)? How have they evolved?

15. Describe your current knowledge base with GR.

16. Describe your current exposure/experience with GR.

17. Describe your current comfort level with GR.

18. Since the beginning of your involvement with the study group, how would you describe growth in the above areas?

19. How do you now define successful guided reading implementation?

20. What are some general concerns you have with successfully implementing guided reading? How have those concerns evolved as you explored guided reading in the study group?

21. What role does guided reading play in your literacy curriculum now? How is this different than at the beginning of the year? What do you hope it will look like as you look to next year?

22. What were some of the most important lessons/learnings you took away from your study group about guided reading?

23. Besides a study group, what do you think has benefitted you most in terms of successful GR implementation?

24. What is your current professional goal as it relates to GR? How has this evolved from the beginning of your guided reading study group?

25. How do you think your involvement in the study group will improve your teaching of guided reading next year?

26. How do you think your involvement in the study group has impacted student learning? What indicators help you to believe this?
1. How has involvement in the study group impacted your understanding, practice with GR in your classroom?

2. How has the level of collaboration increased or changed as a result of your involvement in the SG? How could collaboration be increased? Describe how you feel SG lend themselves to professionalism or collegiality.

3. How has your instructional practice changed since involvement with the study group? What impacted instruction the most?

4. How has being involved in the study group increased or changed the way you reflect on professional literature, practice or student learning? What insights have you gained through reflective practice?

5. Describe your level of comfort within the study group. How did your feelings of comfort and willingness to take risks change as time went on?

6. What are your perceptions about coaching, observing, modeling/demos, and feedback? Is this something you would like to incorporate into your professional development?

7. What are the most valuable parts of being involved in the study group? What is the biggest payback?

8. How has involvement in the study group impacted student learning in GR?

9. What evidence do you have or indicators of student learning improving as a result of your involvement? How are you assessing student learning?

10. What could impact student learning further in your classroom?

11. What characteristics would you use to describe effective study groups?

12. How did the group best support you in your endeavor?

13. How has the study group complimented other professional development initiatives in your building or district? Was your study group topic related to school improvement goals?

14. Describe the impact you think shorter sessions had on overall effectiveness or productivity.
15. What are the successes your group as a whole experienced?

16. What things could/did bogg down your study group? If they were addressed, how so?

17. What are some pitfalls of this type of professional development?

18. What would you have changed in this study group to make it more effective?

19. What made your study group resilient after the mid-year challenges?

20. Would you be as far as you are in guided reading and comprehension strategies without the support of the study group? Please elaborate.
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
1. Describe your experiences with prior professional development. What comes to your mind when you hear “professional development”?

2. What were some strengths of your professional development, meaning, effective measures to help you grow as a professional?

3. What were some weaknesses of your professional development?

STUDY GROUP
1. Have you been a part of a professional study group before the one you are currently involved in? Please describe your experiences.

2. If yes, how was the group established? Why was it established? What was the focus/topic? How long were you a part of it?

3. How long have you been a part of your current study group? What is the topic/study area?

4. How did your involvement evolve? Why did you join? Were you involved at the onset?

5. What do you hope to come away with after your involvement in the study group? What are the benefits of being involved?

6. Has or do you anticipate your involvement will increase teacher collaboration?

7. Has or do you anticipate your involvement will lead to a change in instructional practices?

8. Do you anticipate your involvement will lead to your students being better readers?

9. How can a study group be of best support to you now?

10. In addition to a study group, what would be helpful as you grow as an education professional?

11. What do you feel your role is during the study group?
12. How do you prepare for study group sessions?

13. What is an appropriate amount of work for a study group?

14. How would you describe the ideal study group, in terms of content and logistics?

15. Describe how you feel after attending a study group session (excited, prepared, overwhelmed, worried).

16. Who should facilitate study groups?

17. What is the role of the administrator in educational study groups? The role of the reading teacher?

18. What are characteristics of effective study groups?

19. What are obstacles to effective study groups?

20. What could the facilitator do improve your experience with the study group?

**PERSONAL DATA**

1. How long have you been teaching?

2. How would you describe yourself as a learner? How do you think you best learn?

3. What else would you like the researcher to know about you as a member of a study group, a learner, or teacher?
1. How has involvement in the study group impacted your understanding, practice with GR in your classroom?

2. What are the greatest benefits to being involved in the study group?

3. Discuss collaboration with your colleagues. How has the level of collaboration increased or changed as a result of your involvement in the SG?

4. Reflection is a key part of growth professionally. How has being involved in the study group increased or changed the way you reflect on your practice or student learning? What insights have you gained through reflective practice?

5. What are some improvements you notice in your teaching? How are you assessing your teaching?

6. Have you attempted to implement ideas and new learnings from your study group into the classroom? Identify specific strategies you have learned that you have implemented with your students.

7. What are your perceptions about coaching, observing, and feedback?

8. How has involvement in the study group impacted student learning in GR?

9. What evidence do you have or indicators of student learning improving as a result of your involvement?

10. How are you assessing student learning?

11. What could impact student learning further in your classroom?

12. What characteristics would you use to describe effective study groups?

13. Describe your level of comfort within the study group. How did your feelings of comfort and willingness to take risks change as time went on?

14. How did the group best support you in your endeavor?

15. How has the study group complimented other professional development initiatives in your building or district? Was your study group topic related to school improvement goals?
16. What was the influence of the study group on your overall school structure or relationships?

17. What things could/did bogg down your study group?

18. What are some pitfalls of this type of professional development?

19. What would you have changed in this study group?

20. What things could make study groups more effective?
APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK CARDS

Using 3 X 5 index cards, study group participants at School A were asked to respond to the following prompts after each session.

1. What were two new learnings you had today?

2. What questions still remain about today’s topic?

3a. What comments or concerns do you have about today’s topic or study group session?

As time went on, question 3a was replaced with the following question:

3b. What is something from today’s study group that you plan to try before we meet again?
## APPENDIX D

### FEEDBACK CARD RESPONSE ANALYSIS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Type</th>
<th>GR Back ground</th>
<th>Less Intro</th>
<th>Less Form</th>
<th>Less Plan</th>
<th>Text Sel</th>
<th>Manage</th>
<th>Comp Strats</th>
<th>RR MSV</th>
<th>Det Imp 1</th>
<th>Det Imp 2</th>
<th>Synth</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practical Appl.</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Decision</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
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<td>Student Learning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Logistics Manage</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>Purpose Vision</td>
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<td>Strategy Focus</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Assess.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theory Research</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>7</td>
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</table>
### Guided Reading Self-Assessment

**Teacher** __________________________  **Date** __________

**Grade Level:** Kindergarten  First Grade  Second Grade  Third Grade

**Assessment:** General or 1 Lesson (length of time):

**Directions:** Mark the characteristic within each category which most clearly describes your teaching at this time.

**Materials:** My goal is to have all necessary materials present, organized, and accessible for use during the lesson—particularly the leveled set of books, multiple copies.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My books and other materials are at a beginning point in terms of organization.</td>
<td>I have enough books to practice my teaching but I have not constructed a leveled set yet; I have other materials but they are not yet organized in the guided reading area.</td>
<td>I have a leveled set of books that I am piloting; I have all other materials—easel, white board, paper, markers, etc.—ready for use.</td>
<td>A leveled, well organized, and tested collection of books exists and is ready for use; I have an area for guided reading with an easel, white board, paper, markers, and other materials.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Classroom Management:** My goal is to engage all children in independent activities that are related to reading and writing so that I can work without interruption with small groups for 60–90 minutes.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have not yet established a work board and centers for use during reading time; many children need a great deal of attention in order to work independently.</td>
<td>I have established some centers but I am just beginning to teach children to use them; it is difficult to work with a small group; I do not have a workboard.</td>
<td>I have established many centers; children can work in them independently. I have not yet organized a guided reading time with a work board.</td>
<td>My classroom is well managed with a work board and a variety of appropriate activities in centers; almost all children work independently so that I can work without interruption with a small group.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Groupings:** My goal is to form small groups of children who are similar in their development of strategies and in the level of text they can read and to regroup these children through ongoing assessment.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am just beginning to group children and am not sure what measures to use; usually I teach the whole group; I do not know how to use running records.</td>
<td>I have formed and met with some groups in guided reading and am beginning to observe them more closely. I know how to take running records but not how to use them for grouping and regrouping.</td>
<td>I have established several groups for reading. I take regular running records and try to interpret the results. I have not yet worked through grouping and regrouping. I need more work in analyzing running records.</td>
<td>My groups are formed on the basis of systematic observation using running records; groups are formed so that individuals can use strategies effectively; groups are reformed based on assessment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lesson Management: My goal is to manage the lesson well with children demonstrating that they know the routines and all teaching procedures in place, in the appropriate order.

1. □ I have not yet implemented any of the steps in guided reading.
2. □ I have begun to introduce stories to children and ask them to read it.
3. □ I can introduce new books and have children read them but have difficulty in managing the lesson.
4. □ My lesson is smoothly managed and includes introduction, reading of the whole text by all children, and teaching after the first reading.

Text Selection: My goal is to select a text that is appropriate for the strategies that children are demonstrating and at the appropriate level for the group.

1. □ I am just beginning to understand how to select a text that is right for the group.
2. □ I have difficulty selecting a text; often, it is too easy or too hard.
3. □ I can select a text that fits most of the group in terms of level but have difficulty relating the text to strategies children need.
4. □ I can select texts that are at an appropriate level for most of the group and that support their development of strategies.

Introduction: My goal is to provide access for children to the meaning, language, and print of the story, to support strategic reading, and to leave work that will build the self-extending system.

1. □ Introducing texts is difficult; I can introduce words but do not understand how to use the introduction to help children use strategies.
2. □ I introduce texts but find it difficult to decide what features to attend to in order to support strategies.
3. □ I introduce texts in a way that provides children with control to read it but I have difficulty deciding how to lead strategic problem solving.
4. □ My introduction provides children with access but leaves work to do; the introduction supports strategies and places the text within children's control.

Teaching Decisions During First Reading and Afterwards: My goal is to select powerful teaching points that illustrate the reading process and help children learn to solve words while maintaining a focus on meaning.

1. □ I am not sure how to make teaching decisions and I am concerned that my teaching points do not connect with what children know; I am not observing a shift in learning.
2. □ I am making some good teaching points and am observing shifts but my teaching is uneven. I need to work on decision making and on using running records.
3. □ I am generally pleased with my observation during reading but need to work on timing and quick decision making; I am observing progress; sometimes my intervention interferes with reading.
4. □ My decisions are well-timed and powerful in illustrating processes and allowing children to use what they know; my teaching points do not interfere with reading; children show evidence of strategic word solving.

Children’s Talk: My goal is to engage children in talking about the meaning of the story and about the print.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Children either do not talk about the story or engage in talk completely separate from the story.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Children do talk about the story but not in a way that furthers their understanding; talk is distracting and random at times.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I can engage children in talk about the story; some talk furthers their understanding of the meaning; I would like to sharpen discussion to support strategic reading.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I am able to engage children in talk that furthers their understanding of the meaning of the story and assist them in solving words.</td>
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Engagement: My goal is to engage children’s attention throughout the lesson.

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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I am constantly interrupted because my internal management plan isn’t working; during guided reading, children’s attention is inconsistent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I can work with a group with a few interruptions but I have difficulty engaging all of the children in the group and focusing their attention on the text.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>In general, I can teach a group with very few interruptions; children in the group are attentive, but attention is uneven across the group and from day to day.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>During guided reading, children’s attention is engaged; almost all members of the group attend; there are almost no interruptions.</td>
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Pace: My goal is to lead a fast-paced lesson with children who read fluently and are excited about the new story; another goal is to use all components of guided reading within a 10 to 30 minute period.

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<td>My lessons seem to &quot;bog down&quot;; I either have difficulty finishing all components of guided reading or the lessons take much too long.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>I am able to use all or most of the components of guided reading but the lesson is slow-paced and I often run out of time in the morning.</td>
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<td>I can include all elements—introduction, first reading, and teaching—in the lesson but I would like it to be more fast-paced and exciting for children.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>My guided reading lesson is fast-paced and includes all components—children read fluently and I stay within time constraints to support my overall classroom management program.</td>
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Comments:

APPENDIX F

DISTRICT SELF-ASSESSMENT RESULTS

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APPENDIX G

ARTIFACTS

The following artifacts related to guided reading and comprehension strategies were collected during the study group sessions at Hayden and Southwood.

Study Group
- Topic Schedule
- Agendas
- E-mail communications
- Note taking sheets (Chapter 6, Chapter 7)
- Personal Notes

Guided Reading
- Key Points
- District Guided Reading Definition
- Fountas and Pinnell Quote
- Reading Definition
- Continuum of Literacy Development
- Overview of Literacy Curriculum
- Classroom Literacy Experiences
- Self-Extending System
- Expository Text Structures
- Organizational Patterns
- Book Guides
- Book Introductions: The 4 P’s
- Guided Reading: Setting the Scene Possibilities
- Guided Reading Lesson Introductions
- Fiction/Non-Fiction
- Video Graphic Organizer
- Anticipation Guides
- Planning Guide for Scaffolding Book Introductions
- Word Sorts and Word Sorts Grid
- Guided Reading Video Lesson Observation Organizer
- Matching Books to Readers
- Using Leveled Books In A Guided Reading Program
- Where to Find Text for Guided Reading
- Text Leveling Systems
- Text Difficulty Wheel
Guided Reading (continued)

- Five Steps for Small Group Reading
- Guided Reading Lesson Plan/Implementation Log
- 1st Grade Guided Reading Lesson Plan
- 5 Step Guided Reading Plan
- Guided Reading Group Plan
- Transitional Guided Reading Plan
- Small Group Reading Lesson Plan
- Guided Reading Lesson Plan
- Guided Reading Text Selection Form
- Fiction Story Element Guide
- Fiction/Non-Fiction Features
- Non-Fiction Conventions
- Non-Fiction Mini-Lesson List
- Non-Fiction Search and Find
- Student Accountability: Kidstations

Comprehension Strategies

- Primary Reading Comprehension Strategies Rubric, (K-1, 2-3, 4-5)
- Text to Text Connections Graphic Organizer
- Comprehension Strategies Article- Tim Shanahan
- Determining Importance
- Teaching for Sustaining Strategies in Guided Reading
- Teaching for Connecting and Expanding Strategies in Guided Reading
- Language Arts Coordinator Notes
- Learning as a Scaffolding Process
- Types and Layers of Comprehending
- Column Note Taking Graphic Organizer
- Noting What I’ve Learned Graphic Organizer
- Paragraph Shrinking Summary Activity
- Prediction Relay Inferring Activity
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