SUPPORTING FIRST-YEAR TEACHERS IN AN URBAN CHARTER CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

SUPPORTING FIRST-YEAR TEACHERS IN AN URBAN CHARTER CONTEXT

Samuel V. Fragomeni
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Teaching in an urban school that serves communities with a high concentration of poverty seems to involve the development of specific, contextually relevant teaching skills. For years, the particular challenges of teaching in under-served schools in the United States have contributed to the attrition of talented, experienced teachers, leaving many urban schools scrambling to find qualified teachers. For this and other reasons, urban charter school leaders frequently hire young, inexperienced teachers. Urban charter school leaders often seek to provide intense support to these teachers in an effort to increase the likelihood of retaining them and providing the students in their classrooms with a high-quality education. This study is grounded in a conceptual framework including three major strands of work: teacher professional development opportunities, professional development for first-year teachers, and teaching in urban environments. This practitioner research study involved collecting contextualized data about professional development opportunities from eighteen first-year teachers at two different points during their first year of teaching. The data from these interviews was used to ascertain how participants reported their experiences of professional development opportunities as influencing their teaching practice. This study’s findings demonstrate that participants focused largely on how strategies that were immediately implementable influenced their teaching practice, especially those related to classroom management.
Teachers also reported that their experiences of professional development were supported by the growth stance that exists regarding professional development at Explore Schools. In conclusion, this study offers rich data regarding how first-year teachers report professional development opportunities as influencing their practice and offers evidence to support the idea that first-year teachers in urban charter schools may benefit from opportunities that focus on information that can be immediately implemented.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The last several years have brought significant changes to the world of education. These changes, including the introduction of the Common Core State Standards, cannot be successfully implemented by enacting new policies alone. The likelihood of a new policy affecting what happens in classrooms seems to increase when teachers understand the change and choose to implement the new teaching methods in their own school and classroom contexts (Coburn, Hill, & Spillane, 2016; Spillane, 1999). The common core brings with it a new focus on student discourse and teacher-facilitated discussion that most teachers in the U.S. did not experience during their formal schooling (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011). With a shift as large as this, against the backdrop of increasing diversity in schools, teachers may benefit from high-quality professional development opportunities, as these changes may be difficult to implement without teachers fully understanding the new methodologies and the enterprise of teaching more broadly (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Coburn et al., 2016).

In addition to these national changes that teachers are experiencing, research shows that preparing for a classroom of students in an under-resourced urban setting entails an additional set of challenges (Freedman & Appleman, 2009). Preparation for teaching in an under-resourced urban setting may include both the academic side of teaching as well as knowledge of the cultural implications of all activities that occur in the classroom. While it may be possible to receive this type of training as part of a teacher-preparation program, research demonstrates a connection between a new teacher’s ability to learn new skills and an immersion in the context where the teacher
will be working (Matsko & Hammerness, 2013). Many studies examine the potential benefits of context-specific preparation and some even show a connection between context-specific preparation and lower attrition rates among new teachers in under-served urban settings (Ingersoll, 1997; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002; Scafidi, Sjoquist, & Stinebrickner, 2007).

Pre-service teachers across contexts may benefit from professional development experiences that are different from those developed for seasoned teachers (Burkman, 2012; Chong, 2011; Kunzman, 2003). Research shows that experienced teachers, especially those who have already been teaching in the context in which they will serve, typically have the ability to draw on their previous experiences as a foundation to build upon when presented with new teaching methods. They also tend to have a greater knowledge of student abilities and can therefore discriminate between professional development opportunities that will be helpful and those that will not necessarily add to the effectiveness of their classrooms (Chan & Yung, 2015; Kunzman, 2003). Because of this, it is reasonable, and potentially even beneficial, for school administrators to approach professional development differently for their first-year teachers than they would for those who are more experienced (Burkman, 2012; Chong, 2011; Kunzman, 2003).

Due to their high rates of teacher turnover, urban charter schools in underserved communities may benefit from taking into account these differences between new and experienced teachers when seeking to develop new teachers for the unique challenges of their contexts (Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Goldring, Taie, Riddles, & Owens, 2014;
This qualitative, practitioner inquiry aims to discover how specific professional development opportunities affect the practice of first-year teachers in an urban charter system that serves an underserved population in an effort to ascertain which kinds of professional development opportunities might benefit these first-year teachers as they adapt to their new profession and context. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the range of professional development opportunities that first-year teachers are offered at Explore Schools?

2. How do Explore’s first-year teachers report their experiences of professional development as influencing their practice? What do they report they are learning from these professional development opportunities? What do they report they are not learning that they feel a need for?

3. What are the aspects of Explore that support and/or inhibit how first-year teachers experience professional development? What can this help us understand about the context of urban charter schools more broadly?

By exploring these research questions with Explore’s teachers, this study seeks to provide new information to the world of education that school leaders can use to design professional development opportunities specifically for first-year teachers. In the following sections, I describe the context in which this study takes place as well as the rationale and significance of this study.
Background and Context

Explore Schools is a network of charter schools located entirely in Brooklyn, New York. The network consists of four schools that serve a total of approximately 2,000 students. The flagship school, Explore Charter, was founded in 2002 and currently serves students in Kindergarten through 8th grade. Seven years after Explore Charter opened, the network started expanding and opened the three additional schools. Empower Charter opened in 2009 and currently serves students in Kindergarten through 8th grade, Excel Charter opened in 2011 and currently serves students in Kindergarten through 8th grade, and Exceed Charter opened in 2012 and currently serves students in Kindergarten through 7th grade. Exceed will expand by one grade next year so it will also serve students in Kindergarten through 8th grade. There are currently plans to open two additional schools, one in the fall of 2018 and one in the fall of 2019.

The demographics of these schools are similar enough that they can be talked about as a single entity. Eighty percent of students in the Explore Schools system qualify for free or reduced lunch. Ninety-two percent of the students in the Explore Schools system identify as African-American, with the remaining 8% being distributed relatively evenly among those who identify as multi-racial, Native American, Caucasian, Asian, and Hispanic. All four schools serve mostly students who live within walking distance of the schools in neighborhoods that are generally known as low-income areas and include a great deal of government-subsidized housing (New York City Charter School Center, 2015).
The Explore Schools network serves a high number of special education students, with 17% of its students currently qualifying for special education services. Each school provides a variety of services for these students including integrated co-teaching classrooms and smaller settings for students who have more restrictive settings included in their individual education plans. Many students not currently receiving special education services are suspected of needing these services, but do not receive them. This is possibly because Explore’s families frequently associate special education with a negative stigma (Hale, 2014). This means that a high number of students who would qualify for special education services may be in general education classrooms receiving little additional support (New York City Charter School Center, 2015).

In reaction to this common occurrence, the school system adopted a policy of placing two general education teachers in all classrooms from Kindergarten through 5th grade. This allows teachers to split up many responsibilities as well as to divide and conquer when difficult behavioral challenges occur in the classroom. There is also a high degree of behavioral support outside of the classroom, as each school has a “culture office” in which four to six adults are present to assist children who are in crisis.

While the academic support in each school varies, there are at least two academic directors in each of Explore’s four schools. Academic directors regularly observe teachers and offer feedback that is consistent with each teacher’s individual professional development goals. These goals are created through conversations between each individual teacher and the academic director that supports that teacher. Stronger, more
experienced teachers commonly receive less intense professional development as a result of the academic directors focusing their support on those who need it the most.

A second method of delivery for professional development is built into the school day at Explore Schools. All classroom teachers participate in professional learning community (PLC) meetings at least three times a week. These meetings usually consist of all of the teachers who teach a single grade level at a school and may sometimes include additional learning specialists. The activities that occur during these meetings range from unit and lesson planning to examining student data trends. School leaders design these meetings to be useful for everyone involved, but these leaders have stated that the lack of teaching experience among Explore’s teachers often leads to consensus agreement on lesson or unit ideas that are not highly effective for student learning.

Another form of professional development at Explore Schools consists of direct information delivery by expert teachers and academic directors. This usually takes place during what Explore Schools calls “early release,” which happens every Wednesday. Students go home at 2:00 pm on these days and teachers participate in workshops and meetings between 2:30 pm and 4:30 pm. These workshops are the primary avenue for enacting systematic change in large areas of the schools. Often times, school leaders introduce a new concept to an entire grade band (i.e., all early-childhood grades) and these teachers are then given time to work on this idea and adapt it to their own classrooms.

The quantity of professional development that teachers at Explore Schools receive is partially in reaction to the needs of its teachers. Explore Schools has a history of hiring
a large number of first-year teachers who either recently graduated from undergraduate education programs or are participating in Teach for America’s two-year service program. The instruction in Explore’s first-year teachers’ classrooms rarely leads to sufficient student academic gains, so each of these professional development experiences has been added over the years in order to ensure that teachers are growing as quickly as possible.

The problem of having a number of teachers who are early in their careers was exacerbated during the 2013-2014 school year when the system’s previous superintendent decided to excise 30% of the teachers because he considered them to be underperforming. This move caused large adult-culture problems and many teachers who were not excised decided to leave as well. This forced the schools into a position where they had to hire up to 60% first-year teachers in some of the schools.

This system-wide lack of experience was poorly addressed during the yearly summer professional development, which Explore Schools calls “pre-service,” leading into the 2014-2015 school year. It is important to note that Explore uses the term “pre-service” differently from how this term is traditionally used in literature. I will use this term in this dissertation as Explore uses it, as a noun that refers to Explore’s summer professional development for teachers. This professional development previously took place for 2 to 3 weeks each summer prior to the first day of school. It included experiences such as curriculum workshops, lesson planning, and classroom procedure planning. Because of the turmoil that the massive amount of teacher turnover caused during the previous school year, pre-service was shortened to just two weeks for new
teachers and one week for returning teachers leading into the 2014-2015 school year. While this amount of time would be a luxury in some school systems, it was apparent that pre-service did not effectively prepare teachers for the beginning of the school year. School leader observations of classrooms over the first couple of weeks of school made it clear that many classrooms did not have procedures in place for students and many teachers did not have a clear understanding of what they were supposed to be teaching. This led to consistent student behavior issues as well as a drop in student achievement on internal assessments throughout the Explore Schools network.

This seemingly ineffective preparation for the 2014-2015 school year inspired me to conduct a pilot study to examine how Explore’s pre-service could be better utilized to prepare teachers for the school year. As Explore’s Chief Academic Officer, I am ultimately responsible for teacher professional development, so I felt compelled to improve our network in this area. I completed my pilot study in the spring of 2015 and found that Explore’s teachers expressed that they needed additional professional development and related support in both academic planning and classroom management strategies. I used the findings to design Explore’s 2015-2016 “pre-service.” During this pre-service, teachers focused primarily on unit and lesson planning, with additional training offered on new classroom management strategies as well as classroom routines and procedures. The professional development that Explore’s leaders introduced during this pre-service will be followed up throughout the year in an effort to provide a consistent focus in the professional development that teachers receive. The current study aims to build on the results of this pilot study by examining how these and other
professional development opportunities showed up in the practice of Explore’s first-year teachers.

**Rationale and Significance of the Study**

Research demonstrates potential connections between some types of teacher professional development opportunities and positive impacts on student outcomes (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002; Guskey & Sparks, 2004). Student achievement in the Explore Schools network dropped each of the last few years according to New York state test results as well as internal diagnostics (New York City Charter School Center, 2015). One of this study’s primary goals is to benefit the Explore Schools network in a range of ways. Administrators place a large number of students into the classrooms of first-year teachers each year in this network. Very little differentiation currently exists between the professional development opportunities that these teachers are offered and the opportunities that more experienced teachers are offered. While research demonstrates that new and experienced teachers may benefit from different professional development opportunities, there is little information on what specific professional development opportunities and kinds of support first-year teachers should be offered to maximize their growth within an urban charter school serving an underserved community (Burkman, 2012; Chong, 2011; Kunzman, 2003).

This study aims to equip Explore’s school leaders, as well as leaders in similar contexts, with information that will aid in choosing professional development opportunities for supporting first-year teachers in an urban charter school setting. Many studies have demonstrated connections between long-term professional development
opportunities and changes in teachers’ practices (Corcoran, McVay, & Riordan, 2003; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Weiss & Pasley, 2006). This is the primary rationale for why this study examines professional development opportunities being offered over the course of an academic year instead of opportunities that occur as isolated events. The Explore Schools professional development structure, which includes multiple modes of weekly professional development time, is perfect for studying the importance of sustained professional development opportunities for first-year teachers.

For me specifically, this research study directly relates with my responsibilities at Explore Schools, making practitioner research a perfect choice for this study. As the Chief Academic Officer, I am primarily responsible for ensuring that our various leaders provide professional development to our school system’s teachers while also increasing student academic outcomes. I plan to use the understandings that emerge from this study to offer guidance as to the kinds of professional development opportunities our leaders should be offering first-year teachers so that they feel better supported during their first year of teaching. Specifically, by utilizing the information this study offers on how professional development opportunities influence the practice of first-year teachers, we can make informed decisions as to which types of professional development experiences to provide our first-year teachers related to content knowledge, pedagogy, classroom management, and student culture.

This study also has implications beyond the Explore Schools network of schools. Urban school districts in underserved communities often experience teacher attrition at much higher rates than other school systems (Guin, 2004; Jacob, 2007; Stuit & Smith,
Many studies have examined the various reasons associated with these high attrition rates in urban schools. Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (2004) found that teachers are more likely to leave a school in the first 2 years of their careers than they are later in their careers. This finding is consistent with what Miron and Applegate (2007) found in a study that focused solely on charter schools. They found that the greatest predictor of teacher attrition in a charter school is the teacher’s age. The younger a teacher is, the more likely the teacher is to leave the charter school (Miron & Applegate, 2007). This finding is particularly interesting because the rate of teacher attrition is much higher in charter schools than in traditional public schools, so identifying the causes of this attrition among young teachers in charter schools is especially important if these schools are going to have stability (Stuit & Smith, 2010).

This study goes beyond identifying who is most likely to leave urban charter schools and instead attempts to ascertain how professional development opportunities influence the practice of new teachers in these schools. This is important because studies have demonstrated connections between certain types of teacher preparation and lower teacher attrition in urban settings (Dowell, 2008; Ingersoll, 1997; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Research also suggests a connection between teachers participating in opportunities that actually take place in the context where they will be teaching and the influence that these opportunities may have on teacher practice (Matsko & Hammerness, 2013; Noel, 2010). This means that urban schools broadly, and charter schools specifically, may benefit from more high-quality, in-house professional development opportunities in order to fully support their teachers. To underscore the point, it has been
shown that in urban charter schools, teachers are more likely to name poor professional development as a reason to leave their schools than almost any other reason (Schulman, 2008).

Researchers have conducted numerous studies over the last twenty years in an effort to examine the connections between teacher professional development and teacher practice (Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Weiss & Pasley, 2006). There is also a good amount of literature on how various types of professional development experiences influence pre-service teachers’ practice during their first teaching assignments (Sim, 2006; Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2011). Some of this literature even focuses on examining the various supports teacher education programs can offer pre-service teachers before they enter an urban environment (Abbate-Vaughn, 2006; Matsko & Hammerness, 2013; Solomon, 2009). Outside of mentoring, however, there does not seem to be a great deal of research examining the connections between various professional development opportunities and teacher practice once a teacher is immersed in an urban environment (Abbate-Vaughn, 2006; Matsko & Hammerness, 2013; Papay, West, Fullerton, & Kane, 2012; Sleeter, 2001). Additionally, there is a dearth of research specifically focusing on how to support first-year teachers in urban charter schools serving underserved communities. This study aims to fill these gaps by examining the ways in which first-year teachers report information from various professional development opportunities influencing their practice in an urban charter setting as well as what these first-year teachers report they are not learning from the professional development opportunities in which they participate.
This dissertation study is divided into seven chapters that provide information about how this research study was designed and implemented as well as the findings that have emerged within this schooling context. Chapter two examines the conceptual framework upon which this study was built, including descriptions of the major bodies of research that informed the study’s design. Chapter three describes the study’s research design, including the methods used to gather information as well as how participants were chosen. Chapter four includes descriptive findings as well as analysis related to the study’s first research question, which pertains to the range of professional development opportunities offered at Explore Schools. Chapter five examines the findings and analysis concerning this study’s second set of research questions, which focus on how Explore’s professional development opportunities influence the practice of first-year teachers. Chapter six is comprised of the findings and analysis associated with the study’s third set of research questions, which seek to gather information on what aspects of Explore Schools support or inhibit how first-year teachers experience the professional development opportunities they are offered. Finally, chapter seven offers a discussion of the results as well as concluding thoughts.
CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Implicit within the guiding research questions for this study is a broader inquiry about how to improve a first-year teacher’s ability to increase student academic performance in the context of an urban charter school. Studies have demonstrated potential links between some professional development opportunities and increases in student academic achievement. (Guskey & Sparks, 2004; Holloway, 2006; Shymansky, Wang, Annetta, Yore, & Everett, 2012) Research also shows that teachers are more likely to report on the benefits of professional development opportunities if those opportunities take into account the experience level of the teacher as well as the context where the teaching occurs. (Kunzman, 2003; Matsko & Hammerness, 2013)

This study’s theoretical framework builds on this research conducted in the area of teacher learning and uses a body of knowledge based on three major strands of work: professional development for teachers, professional development tailored for first-year teachers, and professional development tailored for teaching in an urban setting. Each of these strands of work contributes to the conceptual framework on which I base this study. This study’s conceptual framework works from the belief that professional development opportunities that are tailored for first-year teachers in urban charter schools serving underserved communities may influence teaching practices and could be connected with increased teacher retention as well as improved student achievement. I use this chapter to examine the three critical areas upon which this conceptual framework is built. I begin by exploring research that illustrates the links between specific types of professional development opportunities, changes in teaching practices, and student academic
achievement. Next, I describe research that shows how tailoring professional development opportunities for first-year teachers may be connected with changes in teaching practices, improved student academic outcomes, and increased teacher retention. Finally, I examine research that demonstrates connections between professional development opportunities specifically tailored for teaching in urban schools serving underserved communities, changes to teaching practice, improved student academic outcomes, and reduced teacher attrition.

**Professional Development Opportunities**

In order to attempt to understand which opportunities may be most effective in preparing teachers for an upcoming school year and supporting them throughout the year, one must examine the types of general professional development opportunities that have been connected with an increase in the knowledge, skills, and ability levels of teachers (Desimone & Garet, 2015). Over the last couple of decades, research on teacher professional development shifted away from the belief that professional development should be centered on single-serving workshops and instead moved toward more comprehensive engagements and learning experiences (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Stein, Smith, & Silver, 1999). Many types of professional development opportunities have been connected with increases in the skills, knowledge, and ability levels of teachers through years of research studies. Research supports professional development that deepens teachers’ content knowledge, increases understanding of how students learn content, provides hands-on learning, enables teachers to acquire and apply new knowledge, allows for examination of results, aligns with school reform efforts, is
collaborative and collegial, and is intensive and sustained over time (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Desimone & Garet, 2015). Research does not support professional development that relies on single workshops, focuses only on new techniques and behaviors, is not related to teachers’ contexts and curricula, expects teachers to make changes in isolation and without support, and does not provide sustained learning opportunities (Borko, Koellner, Jacobs, & Seago, 2011; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Desimone & Garet, 2015).

Studies have demonstrated a connection between professional development opportunities, teacher preparation for classroom instruction, and a teacher’s ability to help students learn (Desimone et al., 2002; Guskey & Sparks, 2004; Rutz, Condon, Iverson, Manduca, & Willett, 2012; Weiss & Pasley, 2006). Guskey and Sparks (2004) demonstrated that the link between teacher preparedness and student learning is complex, but not random. There are various factors that potentially increase or decrease student learning present in every classroom environment. Professional development for teachers may be one of these factors, as some types of opportunities have been connected to increases in student learning (Guskey & Sparks, 2004; Rutz et al., 2012). This finding is vitally important to this study’s conceptual framework, as identifying professional development opportunities that influence teachers’ practice gains importance if these opportunities, in turn, may improve student learning.

Various methods can predict whether and how professional development leads to student gains. Presumably, if teachers gain relevant knowledge that they use in the classroom, this could turn into increased student learning (Guskey & Sparks, 2004; Rutz
et al., 2012). We can measure whether or not teachers gain new, relevant knowledge and skills through the use of surveys or more objective means like pre-tests and post-tests that teachers complete before and after a round of professional development. An increase on these tests could speak to the effectiveness of the learning opportunity (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Polly et al., 2015).

According to Weiss and Pasley (2006), two key levers allow for the possibility of professional development opportunities being connected to student academic gains. First, professional development (PD) opportunities should focus on clear goals and be delivered consistently by knowledgeable providers. Second, these opportunities should be content-focused and planned as a coherent set of strategies designed to develop teachers’ content and pedagogical knowledge (Weiss & Pasley, 2006; Wilson, 2013). These two levers seem intuitive, but are in many ways a departure from traditional professional development. It was once widely acceptable for a representative of a curriculum company to deliver single-serving professional development sessions that were not necessarily aligned to what was happening in teachers’ classrooms. Weiss and Pasley (2006) demonstrate what other research has also shown; when professional development has been connected with teacher learning, the opposite usually happens. In these instances, experts typically work with teachers or groups of teachers toward a specific goal in a coherent, systematic approach through activities such as weekly meetings or mentoring (Borko et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Weiss & Pasley, 2006). This concept is important to this study’s conceptual framework, as it offers information concerning the type of
professional development opportunities that may be connected with student academic achievement gains. I will explore this further in the following section.

**Consistent Opportunities**

Tom Corcoran, Siobhan McVay, and Kate Riordan (2003) provide an example of the type of effective professional development that Weiss and Pasley describe through their examination of The Merck Institute for Science Education (MISE). This organization partnered with school systems in Pennsylvania in order to increase the professional development available to science teachers (Corcoran et al., 2003). This project aimed to improve the content knowledge of teachers and the facilitators worked over a period of ten years to work toward this goal. MISE reported an improvement in the content knowledge of the teachers as well as student performance in this area (Corcoran et al., 2003). Research suggests a connection between professional development opportunities that focus on specific areas over long periods of time and increases in teacher knowledge, as happened during the MISE study (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Desimone & Garet, 2015).

Research demonstrates additional potential connections between working with a teacher over a long period and changes in areas other than content knowledge. Specifically, this approach has been connected with improvements in teachers’ pride in their profession, possibly due to increased expertise in a specific area, even if that area is a single simple math concept (Berliner, 1986; Li, Tang, & Gong, 2011). This particular finding contributes to this study’s conceptual framework because increases in teachers’ expertise and pride in their profession have been connected to fewer teachers leaving the
profession (Berliner, 1986; Sedivy-Benton & Boden McGill, 2012). Research has also shown self-reported increases in pedagogical knowledge and skills to be connected with learning opportunities that focus on content knowledge, opportunities for active learning, and a coherence with other learning opportunities (Garet & Porter, 2001; Hudson, 2013). Consistent with other previously mentioned research, this self-reported increase in pedagogical knowledge and skills is amplified if the professional development activity is sustained as opposed to a one-time opportunity (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Garet & Porter, 2001).

Consistency of professional development becomes more likely if a program is school-based rather than outsourced. Science and mathematics teachers often must rely only on professional development programs that operate outside of the schools where they teach (Blank, Alas, & Smith, 2007; Wilson, 2013). This is presumably because there are not enough experts to deliver content knowledge in these content areas in most schools (Wilson, 2013). Not only do these programs prevent a degree of consistency because they operate outside of the schools, but they are often designed to offer professional development for one year with no option for a cohort of teachers to move into a second year of teacher learning in these content areas (Blank et al., 2007). Some schools operate their own professional development in these content areas even if they do not necessarily have an in-house content expert in math or science. Some research points to the potential benefits of this type of model by demonstrating connections between teacher learning and teachers driving professional development in the areas where the greatest need is felt at any given time (Miller, 1996; Wilson, 2013).
One specific in-house professional development method that research connects with increases in student achievement involves school-based inquiry teams. School-based inquiry teams involve groups of teachers working collectively in order to solve instructional problems (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Gallimore & Ermeling, 2009). Teachers involved in this method of professional development have been shown to move the attribution of their teaching performance from the students to themselves during their course of their inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Gallimore & Ermeling, 2009). In other words, their locus of control shifted from being external to being internal. Teachers experienced this shift while they focused on single problems for long enough that an actual solution was reached. Seeing a causal connection between one’s own teaching moves and the student outcomes has been shown to foster an intrinsic sense of wanting to work to improve one’s teaching methods (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Gallimore & Ermeling, 2009). Other studies of locus of control have demonstrated a connection between one’s locus of control and one’s level of experience (Cook, 2015; Martin & Baldwin, 1992). Experienced teachers tend to have a much more internal locus of control, while pre-service teachers tend to have a more external locus of control. Specifically, inexperienced teachers tend to believe that they have very little power over the behavior of their students when compared to experienced teachers (Cook, 2015; Martin & Baldwin, 1992).

The ideas in this section create the basis on which this study’s conceptual framework lies. Specifically, professional development opportunities involving a long-term focus on a single area of improvement may be connected with changes to instruction
and, ultimately, increases in teacher expertise and student academic gains. The following sections serve to further contextualize this study’s conceptual framework by examining the research related to professional development opportunities tailored for the specific type of teacher as well as the specific setting involved in this study.

**Teacher Learning in the First Year**

A teacher’s first year of teaching usually entails many challenges and emotional highs and lows. First-year teachers who report mastery of skills including classroom management, pedagogical awareness, and content knowledge are more likely to report feeling successful (Lambeth & Lashley, 2012). Most teachers realize within their first year that their preparation for teaching was not enough to make them feel this success (Corbell, Osborne, & Reiman, 2010; Gaede, 1978; Lambeth & Lashley, 2012). Studies have demonstrated that self-reported pedagogical knowledge increases during every year of one’s teacher-preparation program as well as every year of one’s teaching career, except for during one’s first year of teaching. These findings demonstrate this self-reported knowledge to be lower at the end of the first year of teaching than before the year began (Corbell et al., 2010; Gaede, 1978). This means that teachers may actually feel more confident about their ability to teach before their first year begins than at its conclusion. This is especially alarming when one considers that teachers are statistically more likely to stay in the profession if they report feeling satisfied with their performance (Corbell et al., 2010; Smethem, 2007).

The beginning of one’s teaching career is critical, as almost one out of every five teachers leaves the profession altogether during the first three years of teaching (Gray,
Reasons for leaving may include stress caused by long hours, student misbehavior, negative relationships with peers, and pressure brought about by high-stakes testing (Simos, 2013; Smethem, 2007). As the educational environment in the United States focuses more and more on high-stakes testing, the results of these tests become a much greater stress for first-year teachers. Research demonstrates connections between students’ poor achievement on standardized exams and teachers’ unpleasant emotions (Darby et al., 2011). This finding speaks to the importance of offering academic and pedagogical support to first-year teachers in addition to support with classroom management and procedures. Actualizing this type of support can often prove difficult, however, as there are many competing priorities with regard to what professional development opportunities to which first-year teachers can dedicate their time.

Pre-service teachers may benefit from focusing on professional development opportunities involving classroom management or classroom procedures before spending too much time on content knowledge (Balli, 2011). Experienced teachers, however, have a set of knowledge to build upon and can shift their focus to content-specific areas much more easily. Because of this base of knowledge, experienced teachers are typically more aware of which students in their classes are struggling academically and how to help them (Chan & Yung, 2015; Kilic, 2011; Shulman, 1987). This allows them to identify which types of knowledge may be most helpful to their practice. Experienced teachers also typically have a better understanding of curriculum planning and the importance of collaboration in planning and preparing. Building from this schema allows them to bring
a different perspective to professional development opportunities, allowing for a different design from that which may benefit first-year teachers (Chan & Yung, 2015; Kunzman, 2003).

Professional development opportunities often attempt to cater to mixed groups of experienced and first-year teachers. One disadvantage to offering professional development to a mixed group is that experienced teachers tend to examine problematic situations in a more complex way, which may take more time. This means that if one were to implement a professional development model similar to inquiry, one would most likely need to account for more time if the group is full of experienced teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Gallimore & Ermeling, 2009; Korevaar & Bergen, 1992). This time could otherwise be dedicated to the basic management and procedural skills that many first-year teachers desperately need. This finding contributes to this study’s conceptual framework in that it offers evidence for the claim that professional development opportunities tailored for first-year teachers may be connected with changes to instruction and, ultimately, increases in student academic achievement. I will build upon this idea in the following sections as I examine multiple professional development opportunities specifically tailored for first-year teachers.

**Induction and Mentoring**

Many school systems attempt to address the unique professional development needs of first-year teachers by providing specialized professional development opportunities as part of a larger teacher induction program (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Shwartz & Dori, 2016; Van Ginkel, Oolbekkink, Meijer, & Verloop, 2016). These
programs seem to be connected with reductions in the amount of teacher attrition that would otherwise be attributable to a lack of administrative support (Callahan, 2016; Moir & Gless, 2001; Weiss & Weiss, 1999). Some induction programs have also been connected to gains in student achievement (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Van Ginkel et al., 2016). Teacher induction programs range widely in what they offer first-year teachers and often include meetings with administrators, orientation sessions, workshops, extra classroom support, reduced teaching loads, collaborative planning, and one-on-one mentoring. Mentoring is quickly becoming the most popular of these methods, as it allows first-year teachers to receive differentiated support from an experienced teacher (Callahan, 2016; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Studies demonstrate that first-year teachers who participate in mentoring programs are less likely to leave the teaching profession than those who do not participate in such a program (Andrews & Quinn, 2005; Callahan, 2016; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). This effect may be due to the fact that teachers who participate in these programs self-report that they feel much less isolated than teachers who are not in mentoring programs during their first year of teaching (Andrews & Quinn, 2005). Mentors lead first-year teachers in many activities designed to build the abilities of these teachers (Shwartz & Dori, 2016; Van Ginkel et al., 2016). These activities include lesson planning, lesson observation, classroom management training, and general thought partnership on challenges that first-year teachers encounter (Shwartz & Dori, 2016; T. Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Van Ginkel et al., 2016).
One difference between mentoring and traditional teacher induction methods is that mentoring allows support to be differentiated for each individual teacher (Van Ginkel et al., 2016). This may be important when one considers the unique challenges first-year teachers face in different contexts. For example, a teacher in one study described needing people-management training because she needed the skillset to manage a paraprofessional in her classroom who was much older and more experienced (Smeaton & Waters, 2013). Without the personalized support of a mentor, this type of situation is unlikely to be addressed in a typical teacher induction program (Smeaton & Waters, 2013).

This type of differentiation also allows mentors to tailor this type of professional development opportunity to the classroom management and pedagogical needs of the first-year teachers they are mentoring (Shwartz & Dori, 2016; Van Ginkel et al., 2016). Studies demonstrate connections between this type of tailored professional development and changes to instruction, increases in student achievement, and greater teacher retention (Andrews & Quinn, 2005; Callahan, 2016; Shwartz & Dori, 2016; T. Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Van Ginkel et al., 2016). This examination of mentoring contributes to this study’s conceptual framework by offering evidence in support of the idea that professional development opportunities tailored for first-year teachers may be connected with changes in teachers’ instruction as well as increases in student achievement and teacher retention.
Communities of Practice

Many schools address first-year teacher professional development by utilizing the shared experiences of the first-year teachers themselves through the cultivation of a community of practice, which is defined as a group of professionals who engage in a collective-learning process (Gallagher, Griffin, Ciuffetelli Parker, Kitchen, & Figg, 2011; Wenger, 2000). One form of this method involves first-year teachers working collectively to discuss potential solutions to challenges that the teachers face each day (Akerson, Donnelly, Riggs, & Eastwood, 2012; Lambson, 2010). The challenges teachers discuss can range from classroom management and student-discipline to more advanced topics such as incorporating academic standards into lesson-planning (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011). Participants in communities of practice tend to have a higher awareness of the importance of collaboration and critical reflection, as well as a more developed sense of their professional identities (Daniel, Auhl, & Hastings, 2013). Additionally, studies show a connection between first-year teachers who participate in homogenous communities of practice and changes to these teachers’ practice, possibly because they are able to focus on addressing challenges specific to their practice (Akerson et al., 2012; Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; James & Treadwell, 2014; Lambson, 2010).

Goos and Bennison (2008) studied a community of practice in which a group of secondary school math teachers supported each other through their first year of teaching by using an online interface to communicate. The researchers formed the group during a pre-service program and continued online communication throughout the participants’
first year despite the fact that they taught at different schools. Online meetings included professional, social, and academic topics. This specific type of community of practice proves to be especially valuable for teachers who are geographically isolated from others who teach the same subject or grade. The online interface provides these teachers with the ability to communicate and learn from each other despite their physical separation (Goos & Bennison, 2008).

This study demonstrated a connection between teachers’ participation in the community of practice model and an increased level of confidence regarding teaching among the participants (Goos & Bennison, 2008). This is especially important when one considers the potential connections research has demonstrated between teachers’ confidence and teacher retention (Corbell et al., 2010; Smethem, 2007). Additionally, many studies demonstrate a link between participating in a community of practice and an improvement in novice teachers’ content knowledge and instruction (Akerson et al., 2012; Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; James & Treadwell, 2014; Lambson, 2010). This link could possibly be attributed to teachers seeking development from their peers on topics that are immediately relevant to them (Akerson et al., 2012; Lambson, 2010). This examination of various communities of practice contributes to this study’s conceptual framework by offering additional evidence for the idea that professional development opportunities tailored for first-year teachers may be connected with changes to teachers’ instruction, increased teacher retention and, ultimately, improved student achievement.
Learning from Curricular Materials

While communities of practice and mentoring represent very interactive professional development opportunities, first-year teachers may also learn from less interactive methods. For instance, first-year teachers must often rely on interacting in solitude with academic texts or curriculum materials, which may be connected with teachers learning teaching techniques directly from these materials (Kardos & Johnson, 2007). Grossman and Thompson (2008) studied this phenomenon and found that first-year teachers spend an enormous amount of time engrossed in their curricular materials and typically stick very close to the teaching methods outlined in these materials. This is not an entirely new finding, as Ball and Cohen (1996) argued that curriculum materials should be written in a way that supports new-teacher development and other researchers have created conceptual examples of how curricular materials can be designed in a way that supports teacher learning (Drake, Land, & Tyminski, 2014). Grossman and Thompson (2008) agree with the notion of designing curriculum to support teacher learning, but note that teachers may learn more from interacting with curricular materials when guided by an experienced colleague. While learning from curriculum materials may not be considered an overt form of professional development, this finding is still relevant to this study’s conceptual framework, as it offers further support for the idea that there is a connection between first-year teachers’ learning and professional development opportunities that are specifically tailored to their needs.
Alternate Route Teaching

Much of the historical literature on teacher professional development assumes that a first-year teacher received some kind of training or preparation as part of a traditional teacher-education program before beginning a teaching career. Teacher shortages, especially in high-poverty schools, led to the creation of many alternate-route programs over the last couple of decades that put teachers into classrooms without the education, training, and student-teaching that traditional-route teachers typically experience (Niemeyer, Johnson, & Monroe, 2014). Some studies demonstrate that these teachers may be part of the cause for the higher degree of teacher turnover that high-poverty schools endure, as many alternate route programs end after one or two years (Gottfried & Straubhaar, 2015; Heineke, Mazza, & Tichnor-Wagner, 2014). Teachers who participate in Teacher for America, one of the largest of these programs, notoriously flee their initial low-income placement schools more than 50% of the time after their two-year commitment ends (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011; Heineke et al., 2014).

While it may be true that teachers who are certified through alternate route programs are less likely to stay in the profession, many schools still work to find ways to support these teachers during their first year of teaching. Research demonstrates that alternate route teachers may benefit from professional development oriented around basic teaching skills due to their limited schema (Lowery & Roberts, 2011; Niemeyer et al., 2014). A study by Nakai and Turley (2003) found that alternate route teachers perceive classroom management and discipline to be the areas in which they need the most professional development. Many urban schools hire alternate route teachers, but may not
succeed in supporting these teachers with tailored professional development that takes into account these teachers’ specialized needs. In fact, one study found that a third of alternate route teachers reported pre-year professional development sessions provided by their schools to be not applicable to them (Nakai & Turley, 2003). Many schools, however, have found success in more intense professional development opportunities for this subset of teachers. Smith and Evans (2008) found that alternate route teachers were more likely to report feeling supported during their first year if they worked with a mentoring team during this time period. They found that this type of professional development opportunity may be able to provide the support needed in basic teaching skills as well as the more complex philosophical dilemmas that a first-year teacher is likely to face (Smith & Evans, 2008). This examination of the types of professional development opportunities that benefit alternate-route teachers contributes to this study’s conceptual framework by offering additional evidence for the idea that there is a connection between first-year teachers’ learning and professional development opportunities that are specifically tailored to their needs.

**Teacher Identity**

The types of groups that teachers belong to during their first year of teaching may have a profound impact on their careers. In addition to potentially impacting their instruction, teachers’ membership in alternate route programs, communities of practice, mentor groups, and other knowledge communities may also help shape their professional identities (Schultz & Ravitch, 2013). Teachers typically struggle with many facets of their identities throughout their first year in the classroom. They question themselves as
teachers and people, asking questions such as whether they are nurturers, controllers, or even mean people (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011). Being pushed to participate in various professional development opportunities may help teachers cope with the transition to a new career and develop a sense of professional identity (Hollins, 2011). A great deal of research exists regarding teacher identity and, while not entirely integral to this study’s conceptual framework, I briefly mention this information here because studies have demonstrated connections between developing a sense of professional identity regarding success and a decreased likelihood that a teacher will leave the teaching profession (Corbell et al., 2010; Hong, 2010; Smethem, 2007).

The ideas in this short section add a layer to this study’s conceptual framework by illustrating a potential need for professional development opportunities specifically tailored for first-year teachers. Opportunities that are tailored in this way have been connected with changes to teaching practices, increased teacher retention, and improved student achievement (Balli, 2011; Chan & Yung, 2015). The following section further contributes to this study’s conceptual framework by adding a layer pertaining to the context in which this study takes place.

**Teacher Learning in the Context of Urban Education**

Teachers in high-poverty schools typically leave their schools at twice the rate that teachers in low poverty schools leave (Goldhaber, Gross, & Player, 2011; Goldring et al., 2014). This high rate of mobility contributes to high-poverty, urban schools hiring less-qualified, less-experienced teachers than their suburban counterparts (Ellsasser, 2007; Jacob, 2007). According to The National Center for Education Statistics, students
attending high-poverty schools are far less likely to graduate high school and attend college than those attending low-poverty schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). This means that students in our neediest communities are attempting to learn from teachers who are seemingly the least qualified to be able to effectively teach them (Ellsasser, 2007).

The school system where this study takes place is located in Brooklyn, New York and consists mostly of minoritized students who are living below the poverty line. Teacher learning in this high-poverty, urban environment entails learning an additional set of skills beyond typical content expertise and pedagogy. Schools in these communities face multiple challenges that often include a highly mobile student population, inadequate funding, a lack of resources to handle the greater physical and mental health needs for students, and high teacher turnover (Gottfried, 2012; Noel, 2010).

Teaching in underserved communities is often difficult for these reasons, but it can be done well. Studies demonstrate that teachers new to the urban context may benefit from professional development opportunities that are woven into the fabric of the school (Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Korstjens, & Volman, 2014; Noel, 2010).

While teachers may benefit from school-based professional development opportunities in challenging urban environments, pre-service education also seems to be important as teachers prepare for the unique kinds of context that exist in urban education (Matsko & Hammerness, 2013; Singer, Catapano, & Huisman, 2010). Studies demonstrate connections between context-specific teacher education and the potential for urban teachers’ success in the classroom. Teachers may benefit from education on topics
such as neighborhood history, district policies, and cultural responsiveness. This understanding of context seems to be connected with a teacher’s ability to teach students in an urban education classroom (Gaikhorst et al., 2014; Matsko & Hammerness, 2013). This finding contributes to this study’s conceptual framework by offering evidence for the potential benefits of first-year teachers who start their careers in an urban context participating in professional development opportunities that are tailored specifically for this context. I will use the following sections to examine specific professional development opportunities that fit this description.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Teachers in underserved communities usually do not come from the community and do not share a cultural or socio-economic status with the families that they serve (Boser, 2011; Keyes & Gregg, 2001). In many instances, teachers in high-poverty, urban areas never even visited the community before their teaching placement (Koerner & Abdul-Tawwab, 2006). A key component of teaching in an urban area seems to be one’s ability to be culturally aware and responsive in a multicultural environment. Many urban teacher preparation programs seek to engender their students with an ability to be socioculturally conscious as well as to have affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds (Brown, 2004; Singer et al., 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Teachers who participate in these programs may see themselves as responsible for and capable of bringing about change and may even have a better understanding of how learners assimilate knowledge. The goal of these programs is not for teachers to see their students as numbers or buckets to be filled. Instead, these programs aim to push teachers to know
about their students as people and create learning opportunities that build on what students already know in an effort to expand their students’ knowledge beyond the world that is already familiar (Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Urban schools often consist of white educators teaching classrooms full of students who represent many non-white cultures (Boser, 2011; Goldenberg, 2014). Regardless of the teacher’s race or culture, however, studies have demonstrated connections with student academic achievement when teachers participate in professional development opportunities related to culturally responsive techniques and content-specific approaches (Ford & Quinn, 2010; Garcia & Chun, 2016; Griner & Stewart, 2012). Etta Hollins (2006) describes one example of this in Transforming Practice in Urban Education. In this article, Hollins examines the work of the Urban Literacy Institute, which aimed to design mechanisms that could provide teachers with the tools they need to teach in a culturally-responsive way in their urban classrooms. The teachers in this study participated in professional learning community meetings during which they designed and tailored lessons that were developmentally and culturally appropriate for the low-income, urban students they served. The researchers found these conversations to be connected with changes to many teachers’ perceptions as well as teachers incorporating more culturally responsive methods into other areas of their practice. Additionally, the teachers who participated in this professional development opportunity saw an improvement in their students’ academic outcomes (Hollins, 2006).

While the authors of existing studies clearly argue for the importance of culturally responsive teaching in urban schools, most of this research focuses on addressing the
attitudes and lack of cultural awareness of white pre-service teachers who are planning on entering multi-cultural school environments (Bales & Saffold, 2011; Leland & Murtadha, 2011; Singer et al., 2010; Sleeter, 2001). This leaves room for more research to aid in determining, based on an inquiry with teachers themselves, how additional opportunities influence the practice of first-year teachers who are teaching in urban, multicultural areas. This study’s context matches the contexts described above in that it consists mostly of middle-income, white teachers who serve mostly low-income, African-American families. In light of this context, this section adds important information to this study’s conceptual framework in that it provides evidence for professional development opportunities related to culturally responsive teaching potentially contributing to changes in instruction and, ultimately, improved student academic outcomes in the urban environment.

**Induction and Mentoring**

The case for sustained professional development over single-serving workshops seems to be true in the urban teaching environment just as it is in other environments (Abbate-Vaughn, 2006; Lambeth & Lashley, 2012). One specific form of support that seems to be connected with various measures of teacher development for teachers in the urban education sphere is that of mentorship (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Lambeth & Lashley, 2012). Mentoring programs in urban settings have been connected with increases in teacher retention, improvements in students’ academic achievement, and higher degrees of proficiency on various teaching techniques for the participants (Abbate-Vaughn, 2006; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Lambeth & Lashley, 2012). This is also a self-
perpetuating cycle, as a greater number of teachers who have mentors and stay in urban education for longer may create more teachers who are viable mentors for future teachers (Abbate-Vaughn, 2006).

One program that exemplifies these effects is the Boston Teacher Residency (Solomon, 2009). The Boston Teacher Residency is designed to incorporate research findings regarding the urban education environment. In this program, teachers spend a full year with an experienced mentor before they become a classroom teacher. The mentor leads the new teacher through a specifically designed induction program that includes practice planning and teaching culturally responsive management and discipline strategies (Solomon, 2009). Early research on this program demonstrates possible connections with changes to instructional practice and improved student achievement. Graduates of the Boston Teacher Residency consistently demonstrate student test scores that far exceed those of more experienced teachers by their fourth year of teaching (Papay et al., 2012). Additionally, Boston Teacher Residency teachers leave urban education at a much lower rate than do their typical urban counterparts. Over 90% of Boston Teacher Residency graduates are still teaching in their placement schools after three years (Berry et al., 2008).

Beginning teachers who start their careers by teaching in urban settings typically abandon teaching at alarmingly high rates (Ingersoll, 1997; Jones, 2012). While mentorship is one vehicle for aiding teachers in feeling supported in an effort to keep them in urban education, there are other important factors that we need to consider in developing teachers in an urban setting. According to one study, the top reasons why
teachers choose to stay in urban teaching are a sense of mission, a disposition for hard work, preparation that includes practical knowledge as well as academic knowledge, the opportunity to switch between schools inside of an urban district, and ongoing support from a professional network (Freedman & Appleman, 2009). While not all of these items can be “developed,” it is important to note that preparation including practical and academic knowledge is on this list. This speaks to a need for more research in the area of practical professional development opportunities that can potentially help prepare teachers for the urban teaching environment. This section contributes to this study’s conceptual framework by offering evidence for the connections that exist between teachers in urban environments who participate in prolonged professional development opportunities tailored for this context and changes to their instruction, increases in student academic gains, and decreases in teacher attrition.

**Charter Schools**

The charter school environment adds an additional layer of context to the research that occurred during this study. Charter schools represent an expanding portion of the schools in the United States. Charter school enrollment in the U.S. ballooned from less than 300,000 students to greater than 2.3 million students from 1999 to 2013 and charter schools now educate close to five percent of the students in our country (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). While the diversity that exists among charter schools makes it difficult to describe the environment of a charter school as a single experience, there are some aspects of charter schools that are important to consider for the context of this study.
Flexibility seems to exist to a greater degree in charter schools than it does in traditional public schools, which allows for more innovation (R. J. Lake, 2008). This flexibility does not mean that charter schools are more likely to use entirely different instructional designs than those utilized in traditional public schools. Instead, it means that charter schools tend to demonstrate more wide-spread use of best-practices and utilize existing techniques in unique ways (R. J. Lake, 2008). The leaders of South Valley Academy in New Mexico exemplified this type of flexibility and innovation perfectly. All public school teachers in New Mexico must create professional development plans that most teachers consider to be simply an administrative hurdle (Radoslovich, Roberts, & Plaza, 2014). None of the competencies on the professional development plans at South Valley Academy targeted student performance in 2009, so the staff experimented with revising the state’s professional development plan forms through the use of individual practitioner research projects that targeted student performance. Teachers worked together to study their practice and focus on outcomes that pertain to student achievement. This led to the creation of new professional development plans and eventually improvements in teacher competencies as well as student performance (Radoslovich et al., 2014).

Innovations like this exist in charter schools primarily because school leaders are typically granted much more autonomy than they are in traditional public schools (Carpenter & Peak, 2013; Gawlik, 2008; Hays, 2013). This autonomy also usually extends to hiring and firing decisions as well as the structure of the school day. Despite having less job security and working longer hours than their colleagues in traditional
public schools, charter school teachers tend to enjoy their professional lives and have a
stronger voice in school-wide decisions such as what professional development
opportunities will be offered (Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003; Torres, 2014). Teacher
attrition is generally higher in charter schools than in traditional public schools, but
studies seem to attribute most of this difference to charter schools employing a greater
number of uncertified and inexperienced teachers, both of which are more likely to leave
a school than certified, experienced teachers (Miron & Applegate, 2007; Stuit & Smith,
2012).

This abundance of uncertified and inexperienced teachers increases the need for
robust professional development opportunities in charter schools. This need, combined
with principal autonomy and the desire to innovate, seems to contribute to a variety of
professional development opportunities being offered in charter schools. Ranae Stetson
(2013) studied characteristics of successful charter schools and found that, “while it is
impossible to visit or include a description of every individual charter school, or even
characteristics of all the charter school organizations, a closer examination of some well-
known charter school models revealed…intensive teacher training and ongoing
coaching” to be a common theme (Stetson, 2013).

Studies demonstrate the variety of professional development opportunities
included in this intensive teacher training to include many different forms of professional
development. One study found that many Charter Management Organizations (CMOs)
tend to emphasize intensive teacher coaching and monitoring (Lake, Bowen, Demeritt,
Mccullough, Haimson, & Gill, 2012). Charter schools coach teachers using diverse
methods and structures. Some charter schools employ specific positions designed to coach teachers. Others utilize experienced teachers or consider the principal to be the primary coach in the schools (R. Lake et al., 2012). One model, introduced by High Tech High in San Diego, blurs the line between teacher coaches and college professors. This school hires teachers straight from college and trains them according to a progressive, project-based model used by the school. Teachers participate in this intense, personalized training in exchange for a California teaching credential that will allow them to teach in any public school in California (Robelen, 2007). Coaching may look different across different charter schools, but the high priority placed on individual teacher coaching remains relatively consistent (R. Lake et al., 2012).

Many charter schools take advantage of the flexibility that exists in this environment to utilize other forms of professional development such as professional learning communities (PLCs). The South Valley Academy example described above demonstrates the use of teacher professional learning communities, as teachers gathered with their colleagues in an effort to improve their practice (Radoslovich et al., 2014). This form of professional development seems to provide teachers with a stronger voice in what they are learning as well as an opportunity to learn from peers instead of administrators (DuFour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008). Other forms of less traditional professional development also include this emphasis on teacher voice.

One study examined a partnership formed between a teacher, a principal, and a university professor (Lacina, Hagan, & Griffith, 2006). This partnership aimed to improve the teacher’s ability to utilize the writing workshop model and was eventually
connected with improved student achievement scores. This study exemplifies that, while not every professional development opportunity that charter schools are utilizing has been studied, charter schools are clearly taking advantage of their flexible nature to institute new, innovative forms of professional development for their teachers. These various forms of professional development contribute to this study’s conceptual framework by providing evidence for the assertion that the innovative professional development opportunities that many charter schools offer may be connected with changes to instruction and improvements in student achievement.

The information in this section adds an additional layer to this study’s conceptual framework through an examination of teacher professional development in the urban charter context. Specifically, teachers who begin their careers in the urban context may benefit from professional development opportunities that are tailored for this context. Teacher participation in opportunities that are tailored in this way has been connected to instructional changes, reduced teacher attrition, and increased student academic achievement (Abbate-Vaughn, 2006; E. R. Hollins, 2011; Matsko & Hammerness, 2013).

Additionally, urban charter schools add an additional layer of context that may be considered when tailoring professional development opportunities and also may provide structures that allow for innovative forms of professional development to be explored (R. J. Lake, 2008; Radoslovich et al., 2014; Stetson, 2013).

**Integrative Summary**

This study’s conceptual framework works from the belief that professional development opportunities that are tailored for first-year teachers in urban charter schools
serving underserved communities may influence teaching practices and may be connected with increased teacher retention as well as improved student achievement. In this chapter, I examined the three critical areas upon which this conceptual framework is built. I began by exploring research that illustrates the links between specific types of professional development opportunities, changes to teaching practices, and student academic achievement. Next, I described research that shows how tailoring professional development opportunities specifically for first-year teachers has been connected with changes to teaching practices, improved student academic outcomes, and increased teacher retention. Finally, I examined research that demonstrates links between professional development opportunities specifically tailored for urban charter schools serving underserved communities, improvements in student academic outcomes, and increases in teacher retention.

This study builds upon this conceptual framework by capturing how first-year teachers in urban charter schools serving underserved communities report specific professional development opportunities influencing their practice. In addition to adding information about what types of opportunities teachers report as influencing their practice in this very specific context, this study also serves to add texture to existing research by exploring what teachers report it looking and sounding like when the information they gain from these opportunities shows up in their practice. In this way, this study aims to go deeper than existing research and add information that could potentially be used by urban charter school leaders to tailor professional development opportunities for the first-year teachers in their schools.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

A primary goal of this qualitative, practitioner-led dissertation study is to provide insight as to what kinds of professional development opportunities urban charter schools in underserved communities can provide their teachers in order to prepare these teachers for teaching in urban contexts by examining how first-year teachers report various professional development opportunities as influencing their practice. It also examines what aspects of an urban charter school supports and/or inhibits how first-year teachers experience (and thus report on) professional development opportunities.

As a senior member of Explore’s academic team, I am well positioned to have full access to the information I needed to study these questions in this context. This access, combined with my tacit knowledge of the setting made practitioner research an appropriate choice for this study (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007). Many studies use a mixed-methods approach to study the effectiveness of teacher professional development opportunities. Typically, these studies use student assessment results as a measure of effectiveness for teacher professional development (Cave & Brown, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Guskey & Sparks, 2004). I chose not to use a mixed-methods approach, and instead used a purely qualitative approach for two reasons. First, there were a number of variables that could have potentially affected student academic results in the Explore Schools network this year, making it difficult to connect any student gains with the professional development that first-year teachers experienced. Second, this study is designed to focus on how professional development opportunities show up in the practice of first-year teachers in the urban charter context. While measuring results using
student achievement data would potentially speak to the effectiveness of the professional development opportunities that teachers were offered, this approach would not provide information on how these professional development opportunities influenced teacher practice and would therefore not lead to an answer to my research questions.

The following section begins with a discussion of the site and participant selection for this study with a subsection that details the selection criteria involved in choosing participants. Following this, I explain the methods and research design. This includes one sub-section that examines each of the data collection methods and a second sub-section that describes how data was analyzed. Next, I discuss the researcher roles and issues of validity with a sub-section on my role and positionality. Finally, I present the timeline for the various phases of this study.

**Participant Selection and Selection Criteria**

This study took place in the Explore Schools Network of charter schools in Brooklyn, New York. I started working at the Explore Schools Network in July, 2014 and noticed through informal observation that the teacher induction program for new teachers was virtually non-existent. This lack of preparation translated directly into classrooms with poorly managed routines as well as academic lessons that did not lead to student learning in the majority of classrooms led by first-year teachers. This trend was exacerbated by the high number of first-year teachers that Explore hired due to a large amount of teacher-turnover following the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years. This context provided what I believe to be ideal conditions for this study, which is why I chose to do practitioner research at this site. Through informal conversation, I discovered that
employees at all levels of Explore schools were interested in improving the professional
development that is offered to first-year teachers and were eager to take part in this study.

**Selection Criteria**

I chose the participants in this study using purposeful selection, which means I deliberately chose them because I believed they could provide information that is particularly relevant to my research questions (Maxwell, 2013). There are two reasons why I chose to use this method to select participants. First, I wanted to choose participants with insights that are critical to answering the questions that this study seeks to answer (Maxwell, 2013). The research questions for this study focus on how first-year teachers experience professional development, which means I needed to deliberately choose first-year teachers to participate in this study in order to gather information from them. Additionally, I included several experienced teachers in this study. I made this decision because these individuals work directly with Explore’s first-year teachers and offer support to them on a daily basis. This gives them unique insight into how professional development opportunities influence the practice of their first-year teacher colleagues.

The second reason why I chose to use purposeful selection is that I would like to aim to capture the heterogeneity of the population I plan to examine (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). There are first-year teachers at four different schools in the Explore Schools network who are experiencing different professional development opportunities depending on the school where they teach. It is important to capture the thoughts of teachers at each of these schools because their differing experiences could
potentially lead to them having diverging perspectives on how professional development opportunities are showing up in their daily practice. I also recognize that teachers who teach different grades may experience professional development differently. Because of this, I purposely chose teachers who teach grades all along the spectrum from Kindergarten to 8th grade.

The participants in this study were all between the ages of 22 and 24 years old and had all earned undergraduate degrees within the past year. Every first-year teacher in this study was a female. I did not purposely choose all female participants, rather, the pool of first-year teachers at Explore Schools during the 2015-2016 school-year was comprised entirely of females. There were no other major issues of representation that should affect this study’s findings.

Methods and Research Design

Data Collection

I collected data using several techniques during this study. The four primary tools for data collection were document review, interviews, a focus group, and memos. The first of these to occur was document review. Reviewing the documents involved in this study aided me in answering my first research question as well as formulating questions for the first round of interviews, which occurred shortly after the document review. Following the first round of interviews, I used the data collected to revise my protocol for the focus group, which happened next. After the focus group concluded, I used the data collected in this group as well as my initial interview data to formulate instruments for a second round of interviews that occurred near the end of the school year. I used memos
throughout each phase to analyze various aspects of the study and process the data as I developed my findings as the study progressed. The following sections describe how each of these tools was used in detail.

**Document review.** For this study, I started by examining the pre-service schedule for the Explore Schools network for the 2015-2016 school year. Examining this schedule gave me information about what professional development opportunities were made available to first-year teachers prior to the first day of school. Next, I examined each school’s 2015-2016 professional development calendar, which allowed me to see what professional development opportunities were offered to first-year teachers in each of Explore’s four schools during the school year. I used information from this calendar to request and review the contents of specific professional development opportunities, including professional learning community meetings and early-release sessions, from throughout the year. These documents led me to many questions that I sought answers to by reviewing additional documents, including Explore’s school-year calendar, academic calendar, master schedule, teacher development plans, PLC agendas, PLC choice documents, early-release schedules, data analysis agendas, and several specific workshop agendas.

I used the data gathered from this document review to shape and revise the questions that I asked in the initial round of individual interviews. The interviews I conducted were primarily with teachers who were participating in the professional development opportunities outlined in these documents. This allowed me to discuss the
contents of these schedules in greater detail, thereby improving the quality of both the interview and the document review (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

**Interviews.** I conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews to collect information from first-year teachers during this study. The first round included eighteen interviews and the second round included seventeen interviews due to one teacher choosing to drop out of the study. The questions in these interviews were aimed solely at collecting information pertaining to my research questions. I chose semi-structured interviews over unstructured interviews because this allowed me to narrow the focus to questions that this study aims to answer (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

My reasoning for choosing semi-structured interviews over focus groups for first-year teachers is relatively simple. Using interviews allowed me to go much deeper in my questioning with this group of participants than I would be able to using other methods (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This is important to this study because I am attempting to ascertain nuanced ways in which various professional development opportunities show up in the practice of first-year teachers as they navigate the complex challenges that are associated with teaching in an urban charter school. Individual interviews allowed me to dig through the emotion that is often involved in discussing the challenges that teachers face in this setting. This method also allowed me to dive deep into the answers I received in an effort to understand the specific circumstances under which some professional development opportunities impacted teacher practice.

The first round of interviews took place when it was convenient for the participants during the third month of the school year after the document review portion
of this study concluded. I sent the list of questions seen in Appendix A to each participant a few days ahead of time so the participant had time to generate initial thoughts on these questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The questions for the first round of interviews sought to gather information directly related to my second and third research questions and were also informed by the document review. As participants answered questions during their interviews, I used their responses to craft additional questions in an effort to obtain as much information as possible pertaining to my research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The second round of interviews took place when it was convenient for the participants during the final month of the school year after the focus group portion of this study concluded. I sent the list of questions seen in appendix C to each participant a few days ahead of time so the participant had plenty of time to generate initial thoughts on these questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This round of interviews was purposely held late in the school year to capture any changes to participants’ perception of how professional development opportunities were showing up in their practice as well as to capture information on the full scope of professional development opportunities that occur over the course of the school year. The questions for this round of interviews sought to gather information directly related my second and third research questions and were also informed by the data obtained from the focus group as well as each participant’s previous interview responses. As each participant answered questions in the interview, I used their responses to craft additional questions in an effort to obtain as much information as possible pertaining to my research questions. I recorded each
interview and created a verbatim transcript of each conversation for analysis purposes. Each interview lasted between 21 and 55 minutes.

**Focus group.** I conducted one focus group to gather information from the experienced teachers who participated in this study. This method allowed me to gather a wide variety of responses to my questions because the participants responded and added to each other’s thoughts in addition to my initial questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I chose this technique for gathering information from the experienced teachers who participated in this study because it increased the amount of information I gathered while still allowing me to react to the conversation and probe for deeper meaning. I briefly considered a survey for gathering information from this group of participants, but came to the conclusion that it would not allow me to be adaptive in my questioning in the same way that a focus group would (Robson, 2002).

The makeup of the focus group was somewhat homogeneous. The focus group consisted of experienced teachers who currently co-teach with a first-year teacher that participated in this study. This means that the group consisted only of teachers who teach in grades K-5, as those are the only grades at Explore that have a co-teaching model. The focus group included teachers from two schools, which provide me diversified data that are somewhat representative of the Explore Schools network.

The questions in the focus group, seen in Appendix B, were aimed at gathering information about how these experienced teachers perceived the information from various professional development opportunities to be showing up in the practice of their co-teachers. Specifically, the conversation focused directly on the second research
question, which sought to provide information on how professional development opportunities show up in the practice of first-year teachers. The focus group session occurred after the initial interview portion of this study concluded, but before the second round of interviews commenced. This timing was designed to allow for the data from the focus group to be utilized in the creation of the interview protocol for the second round of interviews (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I sent the list of questions seen in Appendix B to the focus group participants a few days ahead of time so the participants had time to generate initial thoughts on these questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). These questions drove the initial discussion, and I added additional questions during the focus group session in order to drive for deeper meaning and to re-focus the group when responses veered away from information that is pertinent to my study. I recorded the focus group and created a verbatim transcript from this conversation. The focus group included six participants and lasted 50 minutes.

**Memos.** I wrote various memos throughout the course of this research study. I used these memos to collect my thoughts and analyze findings. I wrote the first of these memos on my positionality and identity. Next, I wrote multiple data collection memos as I completed the document review, which aided me in further crafting questions for the interviews I conducted. I created additional data collection memos at each successive stage of this study. I also included analytic memos as I analyzed the data, including one to capture the codes when analyzing the transcripts from the interviews and focus group. These memos took a variety of forms, but had the overall purpose of allowing me to self-
reflect and analyze the various aspects of this study as it progressed (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

**Data Analysis**

I analyzed the data collected during this study using the constant comparison method of analysis, which means that data was coded as soon as it was collected so that it could be examined in light of more data (Anderson et al., 2007). This method allowed me to collect, code, and examine the data as I encountered them and make revisions to my strategy for further collection as the study progressed (Anderson et al., 2007).

Specifically, I began by analyzing the documents in this study in order to inform the questions I asked during the interview phase. I wrote analytic memos as I analyzed these documents to capture trends to use as I planned the interviews as well as for the study’s general findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I then coded and analyzed the initial interview transcripts with the intent of informing the questions for the focus group as well as this study’s general findings. The list of codes used for this analysis can be seen in appendix D. Next, I used the information gathered from the analysis of the initial interviews as well as the focus group to inform the interview protocol for the final round of interviews as well as this study’s general findings. Finally, once I completed the data collection stage of this study, I analyzed and coded all of the remaining transcripts using the codes seen in appendix D.

I analyzed the data from the interviews primarily by using In Vivo coding, which allowed me to use the participants’ own language to classify their thoughts (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used this coding method on
interview transcripts to seek out phrases and topics that were used frequently by participants in an effort to identify themes and trends. I wrote analytic memos as I followed this process to capture these trends as well as my interpretation of them (Miles et al., 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I checked the accuracy of these interpretations by using member checks with each of this study’s participants. These were short, informal meetings that occurred either in person or over the phone upon the completion of each participant’s transcript analysis (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The information gathered through this process informed both the focus group and interviews that were yet to occur as well as the general findings of this study.

**Researcher Roles/Issues of Validity**

One potential threat to the validity of this study is researcher bias. I entered this study having already judged professional development opportunities that Explore offers its first-year teachers as inadequate. Additionally, I had preconceived notions of professional development opportunities that I believe Explore should offer first-year teachers in order to see the student academic gains that we would like to see. While it is impossible for me to eliminate these beliefs, it is important that the findings of this study be based on the information collected from the participants and for those participants to not be influenced by my biases (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

One validity strategy I used to address this issue is that of using rich data. This strategy relies on me being involved in this study long-term and using intensive interviews to gather information (Maxwell, 2013). My role in the Explore organization entails me improving first-year teacher induction as a part of my long-term
responsibilities and I used intensive interviews as one of the primary instruments of data collection for this study. By using rich data, I sought to reduce the opportunity for my researcher bias to cloud the potential results of this study because the information I gathered came primarily from the participants of the study.

A second validity strategy that I used is respondent validation. Specifically, I used member checks to verify my interpretation of the transcripts that I analyzed from the interviews conducted during this study. By using member checks, I reduced the potential for researcher bias because participants verified that my interpretations were aligned with their intended responses and beliefs (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

**Researcher Role and Positionality**

Another potential threat to the validity of this study is that of reactivity, which refers to the influence that the researcher has on the setting or individuals being studied (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). My role as a senior member of the academic team and the person who will ultimately be making many decisions regarding Explore’s professional development opportunities likely influenced the participants of this study. This influence could manifest itself in many ways and my goal was not only to reduce the impact of this influence, but also to fully understand it and use it productively (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). One productive use of my positionality was to gain access to the teachers that I interviewed. While an outside researcher would have found it difficult to arrange these meetings, my position in the Explore Schools network granted me easy access to these people.
The primary validity strategy I used to address the threat of reactivity with regard to the information I obtained was triangulation, which means including different data sources or methods to challenge or confirm an interpretation (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I collected information from a diverse group of participants using various methods to add to the validity of this study. By doing this, I increased the likelihood of finding themes among the data that would lead to potential answers to my research questions (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Because I relied on these themes, I believe that I was less likely to be reliant on data by a single participant who may have been influenced by my positionality.

Table 1. *Timeline for Data Collection and Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Analysis and Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Phase 1 | November 1, 2015 – November 14, 2015 | • Document review                                   | • Document analysis of preservice schedule & professional development calendars  
  • Memo regarding findings  
  • Refine interview protocol |
| Phase 2 | November 15, 2015 – December 18, 2015 | • Initial interviews with 18 teachers | • Transcribe interviews  
  • Code interview transcripts  
  • Refine focus group protocol |
| Phase 3 | May 9, 2016 – May 13, 2016 | • Conduct focus group | • Transcribe focus group  
  • Code focus group transcripts  
  • Refine second interview protocol |
| Phase 4 | June 1, 2016 – June 15, 2016 | • Final interview with 17 teachers | • Transcribe interviews  
  • Code interview transcripts |
| Phase 5 | June 15, 2016 – August 30, 2016 |                          | • Final data analysis  
  • Results |
CHAPTER 4: RANGE OF OPPORTUNITIES AT EXPLORE SCHOOLS

Teachers in the Explore Schools system of charter schools participate in a variety of professional development opportunities. School leaders tailor each teacher’s professional development experience according to his/her grade-level, content area, and school. The majority of the teachers in the network participate in these opportunities through a variety of mechanisms including a lengthy pre-service, professional learning community meetings, school-based workshops, in-service days, lesson feedback, and personalized teacher development plans. This study’s findings illustrate how first-year teachers report the content from each of these mechanisms influencing their practice.

This study’s findings and analysis are divided into three chapters, each of which provides information directly related to one of this study’s three primary research questions. Chapter four provides descriptive information about the various professional development opportunities first-year teachers participate in at Explore Schools as well as a deeper analysis of these opportunities. This chapter seeks to offer information in service of the first research question. Chapter five examines how first-year teachers report these professional development opportunities playing out in their practice as well as what they report they are not learning from these opportunities and an analysis of these findings. This chapter seeks to offer information in service of the second set of research questions. Chapter six describes the facets of Explore Schools that first-year teachers report as supporting and/or inhibiting how they experience professional development opportunities as well as an analysis of these findings. This chapter seeks to offer information in service of the third set of research questions.
Range of Opportunities

The remainder of this chapter begins by providing largely descriptive information on the findings regarding my first research question: “What is the range of professional development opportunities that first-year teachers are offered at Explore Schools?” Following this, I offer an analysis of the findings associated with this first research question. I gathered the majority of the information in this chapter during the document review portion of this study and this information serves to provide context for the additional findings presented in subsequent chapters. The research related to this question led me down many different paths, as first-year teachers at Explore Schools participate in a variety of professional development opportunities. Leaders design each of these opportunities for specific purposes and they seemingly pay as much attention to the modality of learning as they do to the content of the opportunity. I organized the descriptive portion of this chapter according to the various modalities of professional development that exist at Explore Schools. Specifically, in this section I provide information on pre-service, professional learning community meetings, teacher development plans, early release, in-service days, and lesson observation feedback. In describing each of these opportunities, I use the word “teachers” to describe all teachers in the Explore Schools network and will only differentiate when describing opportunities that are purposely differentiated or additional for first-year teachers in the network.

Pre-Service

All teachers in the Explore Schools system participated in eighteen days of pre-service training prior to the 2015-2016 school-year. These days typically began at 8:00
a.m. and ended at 4:30 p.m. Of the eighteen days, teachers spent eight of these days at their own schools and ten at a central location (Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015). Each school’s leadership team designed and led the school-based portion of pre-service, which included a mix of professional development opportunities and work time. The centralized portion of pre-service consisted of over two hundred separate sessions which were run by over fifty different facilitators (Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015). These facilitators included network-based staff, principals, academic directors, academic coordinators, and teachers. The sessions that teachers participated in were differentiated based on each teacher’s grade and subject area (Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015).

Due to a large number of new system-wide initiatives that all teachers needed to be trained on, this pre-service was only rarely differentiated for first-year teachers. The only differentiation that occurred for this group consisted of a single day at the beginning of pre-service during which teachers who were new to the system attended and returning teachers did not (Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015). This day included minimal professional development, as it was aimed primarily at getting new teachers set up with school-provided computers and providing them with time to complete the paperwork required when one starts a new job (Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015). The remainder of pre-service consisted of a combination of classroom culture workshops, academic workshops, and various school-based activities. I will discuss each of these professional development opportunities below.
**Classroom culture workshops.** This category of professional development opportunities includes any pre-service experiences that involved a facilitator presenting new information related to classroom culture and management with the expectation that teachers would absorb new teaching techniques or practical methods of classroom management. Explore Schools uses the terms “classroom culture” and “classroom management” nearly synonymously, so I will use both of these terms in this section. Teachers participated in ten to fourteen workshops in this category depending on their grade level and content area (Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015). These workshops were divided into multiple categories. The first set of classroom culture workshops focused on information taken from Doug Lemov’s “Teach Like a Champion” (Lemov, 2014). This book and its accompanying materials aim to provide teachers with practical techniques for classroom management in the urban setting (Lemov, 2014). Examples of workshops that Explore leaders facilitated with content from this book include “100%,” during which teachers learn how to hold every student in their classroom to high behavioral expectations and “What to Do,” during which teachers learn to provide very clear, concise directions for classroom activities (Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015; Pre-Session Explanation, 2015).

Additional classroom culture workshops focused on the philosophy created by Jim Fay and David Funk in “Teaching with Love and Logic” (Fay & Funk, 1995). These workshops included sessions on how to demonstrate empathy and share control with students in the classroom. These “Love and Logic” workshops primarily aimed to provide teachers with practical strategies to use with students that would lead to fewer
classroom disruptions and a positive learning environment (Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015; Pre-Session Explanation, 2015).

**Academic workshops.** The academic workshops that Explore Schools teachers participated in varied greatly based on teachers’ grade levels and content areas. Explore launched new reading curriculums in all grades in 2015, so much of this academic work focused on training teachers on how to use these new curriculums (Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015; Pre-Session Explanation, 2015). For kindergarten through second grade teachers, this meant learning how to implement the Core Knowledge reading curriculum. To train teachers on how to implement this curriculum, leaders designed a series of workshops that started with an overview of the materials on the first day and progressed into a deeper look at what instruction should look like using this curriculum over the following days (Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015; Pre-Session Explanation, 2015). This series culminated with unit planning and lesson planning workshops in the final days before school started. These workshops consisted of a combination of information dissemination and hands-on work by the teachers in which they collaborated with peers to plan their first days of school (Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015; Pre-Session Explanation Document, 2015).

Academic workshops followed a similar trend for third through eighth grade teachers who implemented the Expeditionary Learning reading curriculum. They participated in overview workshops, followed by pedagogical technique workshops, and finished the series with unit and lesson planning workshops. The primary difference in workshop design between the K-2 teachers and 3-8 teachers was a larger amount of time
spent on pedagogical techniques for the 3-8 teachers, which was attributed to the more complicated nature of the curriculum (Pre-Session Explanation Document, 2015). For elementary teachers, academic workshops followed a similar sequence for math and writing, however, far less time was spent on these subjects due to the fact that returning teachers already had a good amount of experience with these curriculums (Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015; Pre-Session Explanation, 2015). This meant that the introductory and pedagogical portions of the workshop sequence were far shorter than what teachers experienced for the reading curriculums. The amount of unit and lesson planning time for these subjects mirrored what teachers experienced for reading (Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015).

The preparation for teachers who did not teach reading, writing, or math differed greatly from what I describe above. Network and school leaders prioritized the implementation of the reading curriculum, which meant that less time and energy could be spent on building out the pre-service opportunities for other subject-area teachers (Pre-Service Session Explanation, 2015). Science, social studies, Spanish, and special education teachers all experienced a less robust pre-service during which they participated in very few academic workshops (Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015). This is especially important to note, as several of this study’s participants held positions in these content areas. Their pre-service largely consisted of experienced teachers in these academic areas providing an overview of the curricular materials available to them and then spending the remaining days unit planning and lesson planning in isolation (Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015).
School-wide systems. In addition to academic workshops and planning time, school leaders provided teachers with information about school-specific systems through a variety of workshops and meetings. The content of these experiences included items like an introduction to the school-day schedule, an explanation of the academic calendar, an overview of the professional development opportunities that will occur during the year, and instructions about how and when to utilize the school culture support that is available (Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015; Pre-Session Explanation Document, 2015). It would be a stretch to call many of these sessions professional development opportunities, but it is important context to consider in light of some of the findings that will be discussed in the upcoming sections.

Professional Learning Community Meetings

The majority of Explore Schools teachers participate in between one and three professional learning community (PLC) meetings each week and these meetings are not differentiated for first-year teachers. These meetings occur during teachers’ prep time and are facilitated by grade-team leaders or academic coordinators (Leading Excellent PLC’s at Explore Schools, 2015). School leaders typically organize these meetings so the participants are all teachers on the same grade level. Leaders designate each PLC meeting for a specific subject, so a typical elementary teacher’s schedule consists of one writing PLC, one math PLC, and one reading PLC each week (Explore Schools Master Schedule, 2015). Because they teach fewer subjects, middle school teachers participate in fewer PLC meetings. Some middle school teachers, such as Spanish teachers, do not participate in PLC meetings at all due to the uniqueness of their positions in the school
PLC facilitators choose the activities for each meeting based on the needs of the teachers and the context of the school. The types of PLC activities that teachers may participate in include collaborative lesson planning, analyzing student work, and collaborative assessment grading (Explore Schools PLC Choices Document, 2015). I will describe each of these activities below.

**Collaborative lesson planning.** Professional learning community meetings that focus on collaborative lesson planning consist of teachers focusing on a single lesson or a single part of a lesson for the entire session (Explore Schools PLC Choices Document, 2015). Leaders design this type of PLC meeting to provide a professional development opportunity for the teachers involved while also allowing participants to complete planning work that they must address as part of their daily responsibilities. The process begins with the facilitator identifying a challenging or confusing standard that the participants must all teach at some point during the following week. The facilitator then leads the participants through a protocol that is designed to provide a shared understanding of the material that must be taught. Once the participants have this shared understanding, they work collaboratively to design a lesson that will lead to their students mastering the material (Explore Schools Collaborative Planning PLC Agenda, 2015). Leaders design this type of PLC so the participants will walk out of this professional development opportunity with a lesson that is ready to teach and new understandings of how to effectively teach the specific material that was discussed (Leading Excellent PLC’s at Explore Schools, 2015).
**Analyzing student work.** Professional learning community meetings that focus on analyzing student work consist of teachers using trends identified in their students’ work products to inform lesson planning and execution (Explore Schools PLC Choices Document, 2015). Leaders design this type of PLC meeting to improve a teacher’s ability to react to student work in a way that improves overall instruction (Leading Excellent PLC’s at Explore Schools, 2015). The process begins with the facilitator deciding which specific student-work protocol to follow. Some protocols include teachers each providing a full class set of student work from a single lesson, while other protocols may include a single teacher providing a class set of work or a teacher bringing multiple samples pertaining to a single student. The facilitator ultimately makes this decision based on the intended outcome of the PLC meeting (Leading Excellent PLC’s at Explore Schools, 2015).

Once the facilitator chooses the format of the session, participants engage in the analysis portion of the protocol. This involves deeply examining student work in an effort to find specific trends. This work occurs collaboratively, as teachers openly discuss any potential findings and compare thoughts as they work through their data set. Once the teachers complete this portion of the process, the facilitator leads a protocol designed to use the findings from the student-work analysis to improve teacher practice. This process varies in design and has multiple purposes (Explore Schools Analyzing Student Work Agenda, 2015).

One potential purpose is to directly inform remediation teaching that occurs as a result of the student work protocol. In this model, teachers form groups based on
weaknesses they find in the student data in an attempt to remediate students who have fallen behind their peers in specific areas (Explore Schools PLC Choices Document, 2015). Another potential purpose is to inform future teaching. In this model, teachers use the results to target weaknesses they see as trends in their students’ data to create future lessons that will address these weaknesses (Explore Schools PLC Choices Document, 2015). One less common use of this protocol entails teachers using the results of their student work analysis simply to reflect on their teaching practice. This process is meant to create a connection for teachers between their lesson implementation and the work that students produce (Explore Schools PLC Choices Document, 2015). Leaders design this type of PLC to push teachers toward a greater understanding of how lesson planning and execution ultimately impact the work that their students produce.

**Instructional analysis.** Professional learning community meetings that focus on instructional analysis consist of viewing a video of instruction and discussing the ways in which the instructional moves supported or inhibited student learning (Explore Schools PLC Choices Document, 2015). Leaders design this type of PLC to improve teachers’ abilities to identify and define what effective instruction looks like in the classroom so that teachers know what to work toward as they develop as teachers. The process begins with the facilitator identifying the lesson that teachers will analyze by choosing among previously-recorded lessons. These recordings may be exemplary lessons from previous years or could be more recent videos that participants took of themselves (Explore Schools PLC Choices Document, 2015). Once a video is chosen, the facilitator sends the video to all participants and asks them to watch the video with several questions related...
to the instruction in mind. The facilitator then convenes the group and follows a protocol to collaboratively identify the strengths and weaknesses of the instruction. Some groups will add an extra step to this process by also analyzing the student work from the same lesson that the video shows (Explore Schools Instructional Analysis Agenda, 2015). This combination of protocols is intended to deepen teachers’ understanding of how specific teaching moves relate to student academic performance (Explore Schools PLC Choices Document, 2015).

**Teacher Development Plans**

All teachers in the Explore Schools system have development plans that are specifically tailored to their individual professional growth needs (Supporting Talent at Explore Schools, 2015). Leaders and teachers work collaboratively to create these plans based on each individual teacher’s level of experience, strengths, weaknesses, and professional goals. Novice teachers’ development plans typically focus on areas associated with classroom management while more experienced teachers’ plans focus on the academic side of teaching (Teacher Development Plans, 2015). Once leaders and teachers agree to the contents of the plan, teachers participate in many subsequent professional development opportunities associated with this content. These opportunities, described below, include lesson observation, video reflection, co-planning, book clubs, and co-observation.

**Lesson observation.** Lesson observation consists of a leader observing lessons once or twice per week and providing feedback to the teacher in the areas associated with the teacher’s development plan. Leaders utilize lesson observation more than all other
professional development opportunities connected with teacher development plans (Teacher Development Plans, 2015). The process typically entails a leader observing part of a teacher’s lesson with the intention of witnessing the teacher execute on actions specific to the teacher’s development plan. The leader will then debrief the strengths and weaknesses of the teacher’s approach at a later time (Teacher Development Plans, 2015). Occasionally, this process includes real-time feedback during which the leader whispers potential improvements to the teacher while the lesson is still taking place. Leaders design the lesson observation process to provide teachers with personalized guidance that can be immediately implemented in an effort to aid the teacher in growing in the areas identified in the teacher’s development plan (Teacher Development Plans, 2015).

**Video reflection.** Video reflection is a variation of lesson observation that consists of a teacher recording a single lesson and sending this video to a leader for feedback. Similar to lesson observation, the leader views the lesson with the intent of focusing on the areas identified in the teacher’s development plan (Teacher Development Plans, 2015). One important difference between video reflection and lesson observation is that, in video reflection, the teacher is asked to watch the lesson and provide feedback as well. The teacher identifies areas of strength and weakness in the lesson through the lens of his/her teacher development plan. The leader and teacher then meet to compare their observations and discuss what the teacher could be doing to further improve in the areas identified in the teacher’s development plan. Leaders design the video reflection process to provide teachers with personalized guidance that can be immediately implemented as well as to build the teacher’s ability to be self-reflective and recognize
areas of improvement without guidance from a leader (Teacher Development Plans, 2015).

**Co-planning.** Co-planning consists of leaders spending time one-on-one with teachers and planning lessons together that will consider the areas named in the teacher’s development plan (Teacher Development Plans, 2015). Teachers typically arrive at the meeting with a single lesson sketched out in raw form so that no meeting time is spent on choosing a lesson objective. The leader then begins facilitating the meeting by reminding the teacher of the development plan and generally discussing how this pertains to the process of planning a lesson. The two then work together to construct the details of a lesson that captures the required elements of the objective as well as the instructional moves necessary to account for the teacher’s development plan (Teacher Development Plans, 2015). Leaders design the co-planning process to build a teacher’s ability to effectively plan for the most important elements of a lesson. Leaders use this process most often with teachers who are proficient at classroom management and have more advanced teacher development plans, as the process lends itself to focusing on the academic elements of a lesson more than classroom management (Teacher Development Plans, 2015).

**Book clubs.** Book clubs consist of groups of teachers who share similar teacher development plans reading the same book and collaboratively reflecting on what they learned (Teacher Development Plans, 2015). This professional development opportunity differs from many of the other opportunities employed to address teacher development plans in that it does not directly involve a leader. The teachers who participate in this
type of opportunity typically initiate the process themselves or with a group of peers, though leaders sometimes connect teachers with similar development plans in order to start the process. Once connected, teachers seek advice from experienced colleagues and leaders regarding what books align to the development plan they are seeking to work on (Teacher Development Plans, 2015). Similar to a social book club, the teachers are given time to read the book and then gather at a formal meeting once everyone completes the book. This meeting does not represent the culminating step as it does in a social book club, however, as teachers are expected to incorporate their learnings into their everyday teaching practice. This usually entails a series of meetings during which the book club continuously reflects on the book and use its lessons to improve in the areas specifically associated with their teacher development plans (Teacher Development Plans, 2015).

Leaders design the book club process to provide self-motivated teachers with a means to address their teacher development plans with help from other experienced colleagues. Book clubs also function to add bandwidth to leaders’ schedules, which is important because it is impossible for leaders to work directly with all teachers using more intense methods such as observation and feedback (Teacher Development Plans, 2015).

**Co-observation.** Co-observation consists of novice teachers co-observing the lessons of experienced teachers with a leader (Teacher Development Plans, 2015). Leaders typically initiate this process by identifying an experienced teacher with a strength in the same area that is the focus for a novice teacher’s development plan. The leader and the teacher then go together to observe the experienced teacher in an effort to capture a high-level example of what the novice teacher should be aspiring to do.
Once the observation occurs, the leader and the teacher debrief the lesson and discuss how the teacher will apply the lessons learned to his/her own growth. Novice teachers and leaders often repeat this process several times as the novice teacher works to emulate the experienced teacher’s advanced abilities. Leaders design this process to provide novice teachers with a clear picture of exactly what they should be aspiring to in the areas associated with their teacher development plans (Teacher Development Plans, 2015).

**Early Release**

One less-personalized set of professional development opportunities occurs every Wednesday afternoon at Explore Schools. These opportunities are captured under the umbrella of what is called “early release” at the schools because the students end their school day two hours earlier than they do on a typical day (Explore Schools Daily Schedule, 2015). School leaders utilize this time by designing and providing various professional development opportunities for their teachers. These opportunities, described below, include classroom management workshops, collaborative lesson planning, and data-driven planning (Explore Schools Early Release Calendar, 2015).

**Classroom management workshops.** Classroom management workshops tend to be one of the only opportunities that leaders tailor for first-year teachers in the Explore Schools network (Explore Schools Early Release Calendar, 2015). As the findings in the following sections will demonstrate, many teachers continue to struggle with classroom management even after the series of workshops they participate in during pre-service. Most school leaders address this problem by implementing a series of classroom
management workshops during early-release. The content of these workshops typically mirrors what teachers experienced during pre-service (Explore Schools Early Release Calendar, 2015). In order to avoid monotonous repetition, however, school leaders tend to change the actual activities that teachers participate in during these workshops. For instance, instead of learning a new technique for asking a classroom full of students to be silent, the teachers actually practice the various techniques they learned during pre-service after a quick refresher. Leaders design this type of professional development opportunity to reintroduce and fortify classroom management skills first presented during pre-service (Explore Schools Early Release Calendar, 2015).

**Collaborative lesson planning.** Collaborative lesson planning aims to prepare teachers for upcoming instruction while also improving their ability to anticipate the teaching techniques necessary for an effective lesson (Collaborative Lesson Planning Agenda, 2015). During early-release lesson planning, teachers typically work collaboratively with the guidance of a lead teacher or an academic coordinator. The process itself looks extremely similar to the lesson planning described above that happens during professional learning community meetings, however, there are two key differences.

First, because early-release is much longer than a teacher’s typical prep time, the lesson planning sessions that occur during early-release can be much longer than the lesson planning sessions that happen during PLC meetings. This extra time allows for a greater depth to the discussion and more experiences related to teacher learning (Collaborative Lesson Planning Agenda, 2015). The second difference relates to the
actual participants in the lesson planning session. The extended amount of time along
with the fact that early-release happens at the end of the day means that teachers from all
of the schools in the network can get together for early-release sessions. This is a
dramatic difference, especially for upper-school teachers who often represent the only
person holding their exact teaching position in their schools (Collaborative Lesson
Planning Agenda, 2015). Instead of a 6th grade math teacher participating in a PLC
meeting with the 7th and 8th grade math teachers from the school, the 6th grade math
teacher can actually plan with the network’s other 6th grade math teachers during early-
release. Leaders design this collaborative professional development opportunity
specifically so teachers are exposed to the ideas of other teachers who teach the same
grade and subject in an effort to inspire peer-to-peer learning (Collaborative Lesson
Planning Agenda, 2015).

**Data-driven planning.** Leaders often utilize early-release time to work with
groups of teachers on creating individual academic plans for students based on recent
data (Explore Schools Early Release Calendar, 2015). In the most prevalent example of
this, teachers use data from students’ individual reading assessments to create plans that
will target each students’ areas of growth (Data-Driven Planning, 2015). To make this
happen, facilitators lead teachers through a protocol designed to build a teacher’s ability
to analyze students’ reading assessments and identify the most important areas of growth
for each student. Facilitators then provide examples of how each area of growth can be
targeted through one-on-one lessons with students, often providing additional resources
that explain how various growth areas can be targeted (Data-Driven Planning, 2015).
Teachers use this information to build individual plans for each student in their class, which will usually be implemented during small group instruction. Leaders design this type of professional development opportunity to build teachers’ abilities to create individual plans based on student data (Data-Driven Planning, 2015).

**In-Service Days**

All Explore Schools teachers participate in full-day in-service days four times per year (Explore Schools 2015-2016 Calendar, 2015). The school system’s calendar consists of five terms and the in-service days take place at the beginning of the second, third, fourth, and fifth terms. Other than pre-service, these days are the only time during the year when all of Explore’s teachers gather in one place to participate in professional development activities (Explore Schools 2015-2016 Calendar, 2015). The opportunities that teachers participate in during in-service days vary based on experience level, grade, and subject (Explore Schools In-Service Day Calendar, 2015). During the 2015-2016 school-year, most first-year teachers participated in the types of opportunities described below, such as facilitated data analysis, remediation program workshops, and collaborative planning (Explore Schools In-Service Day Calendar, 2015).

**Facilitated data analysis.** Leaders design in-service data analysis sessions with the intention of improving teachers’ abilities to use student assessment data to plan future instruction (Data Analysis Agenda & Handouts, 2015). While this process is similar to the data-driven planning described above, it differs in that it is designed to focus on trends within the data instead of reacting to individual student data (Data Analysis Agenda & Handouts, 2015). All teachers in the network participate in some form of
facilitated data analysis, although it tends to look different based on the subject area and the content of the assessments being analyzed (Explore Schools In-Service Day Calendar, 2015). The preparation for these sessions begins with teachers administering a set of summative assessments to their students at the end of each term. Teachers then enter their students’ assessment results into Explore’s student information system, which categorizes the results according to question type and standards assessed. Teachers bring this data to the data analysis session, where session facilitators lead teachers through a protocol designed to identify the most important trends in their students’ data. The protocol typically includes an analysis of each teacher’s individual data along with a larger summary of the overall trends seen across the network (Data Analysis Agenda & Handouts, 2015).

Teachers then use the findings of their data analysis to plan future lessons. One way teachers may use their data is to plan small-group remediation lessons that target specific skills or standards that a group of students struggled on despite the larger group’s success (Data Analysis Agenda & Handouts, 2015). Teachers may also use their findings to plan whole-class lessons that directly target areas that were identified as weak points in the data (Data Analysis Agenda & Handouts, 2015). Leaders design this process to be something that teachers can repeat on a smaller scale once they become proficient at knowing how to interact with their students’ data. In this way, the entire facilitated data analysis process doubles as a professional development opportunity and an opportunity to complete data analysis work that will immediately benefit students (Data Analysis Agenda & Handouts, 2015).
**Remediation program workshops.** The Explore Schools network introduced a new remediation program during the 2015-2016 school year in an effort to reduce the number of students who were reading below grade-level. This program, Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI), required teachers to absorb a massive amount of new information in order to implement it in their classrooms. Leaders from several of Explore’s schools collaborated to design and facilitate a series of workshops on this new intervention program (Explore Schools In-Service Day Calendar, 2015). These workshops, which took place on in-service days throughout the year, proceeded through several stages of teacher development. Leaders designed the first workshop to introduce teachers to materials as well as the structure of the lessons. The second workshop included guided planning as well as tips from teachers experienced with the program. Subsequent workshops focused on introducing student data into the lesson planning process as well as actual practice for conducting the lessons from the program (LLI Workshop Agenda & Materials, 2015). The audience for these workshops primarily included the network’s reading teachers, but many schools utilized other subject-area teachers as well in their effort to improve student reading levels (Explore Schools In-Service Day Calendar, 2015). Leaders designed these workshops to disseminate knowledge of this reading program as well as to build teachers’ abilities to improve their students’ reading levels (LLI Workshop Agenda & Materials, 2015).

**Collaborative planning.** Many of Explore’s teachers participate in collaborative planning sessions as part of their in-service day experience (Explore Schools In-Service Day Calendar, 2015). Leaders design these sessions to offer teachers an opportunity to
spend time planning lessons with their peers from other schools (Collaborative Lesson Planning Agenda, 2015). Teachers learn from each other as they work together to plan the various components of upcoming lessons. The primary draw to this type of professional development opportunity is not any information that is disseminated by a leader or facilitator. Rather, for many teachers, this represents one of only a few opportunities to plan with a peer who teaches the same grade and subject area (Explore Schools 2015-2016 Academic Calendar, 2015). Leaders typically facilitate collaborative planning simply by organizing the groups and providing teachers with a list of work products that they are expected to produce. Facilitators then participate in the process by joining collaborative groups for short periods of time to potentially add expertise. This type of professional development opportunity primarily aims to improve teachers’ lesson-planning abilities as well as their content knowledge (Collaborative Lesson Planning Agenda, 2015).

**Observation and Feedback**

The final type of professional development opportunity that I will discuss in this section entails a leader observing a lesson and providing targeted feedback to a teacher based on the observation (Supporting Talent at Explore Schools, 2015). This process sounds similar to what I described above as one activity included in teacher development plans, but there is one key difference. The type of observation and feedback described here does not necessitate the feedback being tied to any particular goal for the teacher. Instead, this type of observation and feedback usually stems from a leader walking into a classroom unannounced, observing a portion of a lesson while taking notes, and meeting
with the observed teacher later in the day to debrief the leader’s notes. Teachers are expected to learn from this experience and improve in the areas where leaders provide feedback (Supporting Talent at Explore Schools, 2015). Because this type of observation is not designed to include a follow-up visit, leaders usually limit their feedback to very targeted areas that can be quickly improved. Leaders design this type of professional development opportunity to provide teachers with quick, actionable feedback that will aid them in their overall growth as teachers (Supporting Talent at Explore Schools, 2015).

The list of professional development opportunities described above represents the majority of the opportunities first-year teachers experience at Explore Schools. This list, however, falls short of encompassing all of the opportunities first-year teachers are offered. As you will see in the following sections, leaders work hard to tailor professional development opportunities for first year teachers in a way that is as impactful as possible for each teacher. Through these efforts, leaders introduce new variations on the opportunities listed above every day. While this makes any attempt at a completely inclusive list futile, the preceding section serves to provide contextual information directly related to the study’s first research question as well as to provide a strong sense of the milieu around professional development that will allow the reader to fully engage in the analysis to come.

**Categories of Professional Development**

The descriptive portion of this chapter clearly demonstrates the wide range of professional development opportunities Explore offers its teachers. These opportunities include many different skills, content areas, and modalities of learning. I analyzed these
findings in an attempt to understand the nature of these professional development opportunities. While doing so, I uncovered what may be Explore’s underlying assumptions about what types of professional development opportunities first-year teachers need to be successful. To examine the nature of these various opportunities, I categorized each opportunity into one of two categories that emerged as I analyzed this data. In this section, I briefly examine each of these categories as well as four subcategories that emerged during this analytical process. Following this, I describe what these subcategories and the opportunities within each of them means with regard to the assumptions being made about what teachers need.

**Nature of the Opportunities**

The groupings that emerged as I analyzed this data consist of two large categories with two subcategories in each of these larger categories. The first category, which I call “educational knowledge building” includes all opportunities that add to teachers’ knowledge of classroom teaching over time. The opportunities in this category are not designed to dramatically alter the next day’s instruction. Instead, leaders design these opportunities to build teachers’ knowledge of pedagogy, content knowledge, and teaching skills over an extended period of time in a strategic, methodical way. The skills learned during these opportunities tend to be complex and without a measurable endpoint. For instance, teachers may work on improving their approach to lesson planning, which is widely considered a skill that can always get better. I call the two subcategories in this category “pedagogical and content knowledge building” and “product creation.” I will
explain each of these subcategories, including the differences between them, in more detail below.

The second large category that emerged as I analyzed this data consists of opportunities that aim to provide teachers with skills and strategies that can be immediately implemented in their classrooms. I call this category “immediate implementation.” The opportunities in this category typically focus on less complex skills that teachers can learn quickly. For instance, teachers may learn a classroom management technique aimed at getting students’ attention. In this case, a leader can quickly model the technique and ask the teacher to practice this technique without students present. The technique can then be implemented as soon as the teacher returns to a classroom of students. While this category also seeks to build the knowledge of teachers, it differs substantially because all of the opportunities in this category seek to add immediately implementable skills instead of complex skills that are best learned over time. There are two subcategories that fall into the immediate implementation category. I call these “quickly-learned strategies” and “responsive to immediate teacher needs.” I will explain each of these in more detail, including the differences between the two, below. It is important to note that each of these categories cuts across the modalities of presentation and instead focuses on the content of the opportunities, as this emerged as a stronger trend when analyzing this study’s data. The following table provides a high-level overview of all four subcategories as well as a list of the opportunities associated with each of these subcategories.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Short Description</th>
<th>Opportunities Included</th>
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| Educational Knowledge Building | Pedagogical and Content Knowledge Building | Opportunities aimed at building teachers’ knowledge of pedagogy, content knowledge, and teaching skills over time without the creation of any products that can be immediately used | - Pre-service academic workshops  
- School-wide system workshops  
- PLC instructional analysis  
- Book clubs  
- Co-observation related to teacher development plans  
- Content-based workshops |
|                          | Product Creation                   | Opportunities aimed at building teachers’ knowledge of pedagogy, content knowledge, and teaching skills over time while also creating a product such as a lesson plan that can be immediately used by the teacher | - Collaborative lesson planning  
- Analyzing student work  
- Co-planning with a leader  
- Collaborative lesson planning workshops  
- Data-driven planning workshops  
- Data analysis workshops |
| Immediate Implementation | Quickly-learned strategies         | Opportunities aimed at providing teachers with pre-determined strategies and skills that can be immediately implemented in the classroom | - Pre-service classroom culture workshops  
- Early-release classroom management workshops |
|                          | Responsive to Teacher Needs        | Opportunities aimed at providing teachers with strategies and skills that are responsive to teachers’ specific needs and that can be immediately implemented in the classroom | - Video reflection  
- Observation and feedback |

**Pedagogical and content knowledge building.** This subcategory falls under the educational knowledge building category and includes any professional development opportunity that focuses on building teachers’ big-picture knowledge of teaching practices, including pedagogy and content. I could call this the “big picture” subcategory because these opportunities are designed to add to a teacher’s overall repertoire of teaching knowledge rather than provide them with small, easily implemented teaching
strategies. This subcategory typically entails learning complex skills such as lesson planning over long periods of time. Opportunities that fall into this subcategory are generally designed based on a pre-determined set of knowledge that one of Explore’s leaders believes beginning teachers need (Pre-Service Session Explanation, 2015; Leading Excellent PLC’s at Explore Schools, 2015; Supporting Talent at Explore Schools, 2015). Among the opportunities that Explore offers, the following all seem to fall into the pedagogical and content knowledge building subcategory: pre-service academic workshops, school-wide system workshops, PLC instructional analysis, book clubs, co-observation related to teacher development plans, and workshops designed to train teachers on the new remediation programs.

This subcategory may be best understood by examining how a couple of these opportunities fit into the subcategory. Pre-service academic workshops, for example, seem to fit cleanly into this subcategory because of their focus on knowledge assimilation regarding Explore’s various curricula (Pre-Service Session Explanation, 2015). As mentioned in the previous section, these workshops aimed to prepare teachers with information about how the various components of each curriculum fit together as well as a high-level picture of how to plan for each subject (Pre-Service Session Explanation, 2015). These sessions sought to provide teachers with information about the curricula and some of the tools they needed to plan. The information itself, however, was mostly focused on the assimilation of knowledge that could be applied later rather than anything that was immediately applicable (Pre-Service Session Explanation, 2015). This is the key feature that causes this type of opportunity to be grouped into this subcategory. The
academic workshops sought to build long-term knowledge of a complex set of material over a period of time instead of aiming to provide teachers with strategies that could be easily implemented the next day.

This was also true of the second example I will mention here, book clubs. These opportunities aimed to provide teachers with new information about specific methods or teaching practices (Teacher Development Plans, 2015). While teachers could certainly experiment with these methods and incorporate them into their practice over time, the information learned during book clubs was rarely intended to be immediately applicable to a teacher’s practice (Teacher Development Plans, 2015). Instead, this opportunity, like the others in this subcategory, focused on building the “big picture” knowledge base of the teachers who participated in it. These examples show us that the professional development opportunities that fall into this subcategory aim to add to teachers’ overall knowledge of teaching and curriculum, rather than providing teachers with tools that can be immediately implemented the following day.

Product creation. This second subcategory that falls under the educational knowledge building category is similar to the first, with one key difference. The professional development opportunities in this subcategory also entail long-term knowledge building, but teachers walk away from these opportunities with a product that they can immediately utilize. This difference could be explained using the popular “teach a man to fish” proverb. In the pedagogical and content knowledge building subcategory, leaders are “teaching the teachers how to fish” with the hope that the knowledge they are attempting to build will allow teachers to understand the overall approach and utilize
their new skills down the road. In the product creation subcategory, however, leaders are both teaching the teachers how to fish and giving them the fish at the same time. These opportunities include the experience of creating a finished product, so the teachers are learning big-picture knowledge while also ending with a product they can immediately use. Similar to opportunities in the pedagogical and content knowledge building subcategory, the opportunities in this subcategory typically focus on complicated skills that take teachers a long time to master. This is presumably why these opportunities repeat several times over the course of the year (Leading Excellent PLC’s at Explore Schools, 2015; Explore Schools Analyzing Student Work Agenda, 2015; Explore Schools Collaborative Planning PLC Agenda, 2015). The opportunities in this subcategory include collaborative lesson planning during PLC meetings, analyzing student work, co-planning with a leader, collaborative lesson planning workshops, data-driven planning workshops, and data analysis workshops.

I will use collaborative lesson planning as an example to further explain this subcategory. In this particular opportunity, leaders attempt to build the lesson-planning skills of teachers. This planning often focuses on a single part of the lesson that a teacher or group of teachers is attempting to improve on over time (Explore Schools Collaborative Planning PLC Agenda, 2015). This represents the knowledge building portion of this opportunity. The idea behind focusing on a portion of the lesson is to build a transferrable skill that the teacher can apply to other lessons being planned in the future (Explore Schools Collaborative Planning PLC Agenda, 2015). The added benefit of this opportunity, and the feature that places it in this subcategory instead of the
pedagogical and content knowledge building subcategory, is the completed lesson plan the teacher has when the opportunity finishes. This saves the teacher time and provides the teacher with something that can be immediately utilized. This shows us that the opportunities in this subcategory build long-term knowledge while also providing the teacher with the added benefit of ending with a product that can be immediately used.

**Quickly-learned strategies.** The next subcategory of professional development falls under the immediate implementation category and includes any opportunity that provides teachers with strategies that can be quickly learned and immediately implemented. The information presented during these opportunities is usually very focused and practical. Leaders intend for teachers to learn the skills and strategies discussed during these opportunities so quickly that the new skills can be utilized during the following day’s instruction (Pre-Service Session Explanation, 2015). The skills teachers learn during these opportunities are typically much simpler than the complex skills learned in the opportunities that fall under the educational knowledge building category. These skills are typically pre-determined by school leaders based on what they believe novice teachers to need. The opportunities Explore offers that fall into this subcategory include the pre-service classroom culture workshops and early-release classroom management workshops.

Each of these examples focuses on providing teachers with practical strategies and techniques to use when managing one’s classroom. The techniques are quickly learned and teachers can try them immediately after they are learned. While the pre-service workshops do not technically allow for a teacher to utilize the information learned
the next day, the content is such that teachers can learn the information quickly and use it on the first day of school (Pre-Service Session Explanation, 2015). These opportunities usually entail learning several techniques within one session due to the simplicity of the techniques (Pre-Service Session Explanation, 2015). There is also often a practice component where teachers will practice the technique with other adults in order to hone the language being used and troubleshoot any possible drawbacks to the technique. Overall, this subcategory differs from the previous categories in that the opportunities in this subcategory are designed so teachers can immediately implement the information presented (Pre-Service Session Explanation, 2015).

**Responsive to teacher needs.** The next subcategory of professional development opportunities also falls under the immediate implementation category and includes information that can be quickly implemented. This subcategory differs from the previous subcategory, however, in that it entails the opportunity’s content being generated in response to the needs of the teacher. The teacher’s needs may be identified by the teacher or by a leader. Instead of proactively assuming the types of skills a first-year teacher may benefit from learning as occurs for the opportunities listed in the previous subcategory, the opportunities in this subcategory are planned reactively. Specifically, a teacher or a leader may observe the teacher’s instruction and assess which areas of the teacher’s instruction would benefit from changes or a new approach (Teacher Development Plans, 2015). The opportunities in this subcategory include lesson observation and video reflection as part of teachers’ development plans as well as general observation and feedback.
Looking at lesson observation and feedback as an example allows one to see the reactive nature of this subcategory. This professional development opportunity includes a leader observing a teacher’s instruction, assessing what could be improved, and meeting with the teacher to discuss simple strategies that can address the perceived need (Supporting Talent at Explore Schools, 2015). The information is tailored to the teacher’s needs and is typically simple enough to implement immediately (Supporting Talent at Explore Schools, 2015). This makes this type of opportunity very similar to those in the “quickly-learned strategies” subcategory, with the only difference being the tailored, reactive nature of the information presented to the teacher.

Assumptions of Teacher Needs

Looking through the lens of the four subcategories explained above allows one to examine the assumptions that the Explore Schools leaders seem to be making about teacher professional development. The diversity of professional development opportunities makes it relatively easy to assume that Explore’s leaders believe that teachers will benefit from more than one type of learning experience. Explore’s professional development offerings include a wealth of different modalities of presentation as well as many different content foci. If we are assuming intentionality in this design, then we can also assume that Explore’s leaders believe teachers may learn more if information is presented in many different ways. This diversity of presentation includes the categories and subcategories mentioned in this section. Explore’s leaders seem to be providing a mix of opportunities aimed at building big-picture knowledge,
while also providing opportunities aimed at teaching skills and techniques that can be immediately implemented the next day.

When one digs deeper into this analysis, however, it becomes apparent that there is not an even mix of opportunities within the four subcategories I present in this section. Specifically, first-year teachers at Explore spend much more time participating in opportunities that build big-picture educational knowledge than they do in opportunities that provide teachers with information that can be immediately implemented. In fact, when examining the various documents that comprise teachers’ professional development schedules, I found that first-year teachers spend roughly five times as much time participating in opportunities that fall into the educational knowledge building categories than they do in the categories that provide skills and techniques that can be immediately implemented (Explore Schools 2015-2016 Academic Calendar, 2015; Explore Schools Pre-Service Schedule, 2015; Supporting Talent at Explore Schools, 2015; Explore Schools Early Release Calendar, 2015).

This finding could mean that Explore’s leaders place more value on professional development opportunities that build teachers’ knowledge than opportunities that provide teachers with strategies that can be immediately implemented. Conversely, it could mean that Explore’s leaders simply believe that building big-picture knowledge takes more time than providing teachers with strategies that can be immediately implemented. While we cannot know the reasoning for sure given the parameters of this study, this finding speaks to Explore’s assumption that first-year teachers should spend more time participating in opportunities that build big-picture educational knowledge than
opportunities that provide strategies and techniques that can be immediately implemented. I return to this finding in later chapters in order to examine how it interacts with how teachers report their professional development opportunities as influencing their practice.
CHAPTER 5: EXPERIENCES OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

First-year teachers in the Explore Schools network interacted with the professional development opportunities described above in a variety of ways. Every teacher I interviewed easily named ways in which many of these opportunities influenced their everyday practice as well as gaps they felt were present in the opportunities they were offered. I use this chapter to describe the trends within the ways that the study participants reflected on how professional development opportunities are influencing their teaching practice as well as the perceived gaps in the opportunities Explore Schools offers these teachers. This chapter provides information directly related to this study’s second set of research questions: “How do Explore’s first-year teachers report their experiences of professional development as influencing their practice? What do they report they are learning from these professional development opportunities? What do they report they are not learning that they feel a need for?”

This chapter is organized according to the major findings associated with this second set of research questions. I begin by describing how first-year teachers reported professional development opportunities associated with classroom management strategies as influencing their practice, including sections on how teachers reported opportunities related to emotional constancy and providing clear directions showing up in their practice. Next, I examine how this study’s participants reported professional development opportunities associated with lesson planning as influencing their practice, with sections on how teachers described opportunities related to lesson structure and expectations for student work as influencing their practice. Following this, I examine my
findings related to what first-year teachers report they are not learning from the professional development opportunities they participate in at Explore Schools. Finally, I offer an analysis of the findings in this chapter by utilizing the categories of professional development introduced in chapter four as a lens for this analysis.

**Classroom Management Strategies**

Every teacher who participated in this study named multiple ways in which professional development opportunities that focused on classroom management strategies impacted their teaching practice. This statement cannot be made about any other type of professional development opportunity. The examples teachers provided include a variety of ways in which these opportunities impacted their practice, from simple strategies to get a group of students to be silent to complicated techniques for staying emotionally constant during a stressful moment. The consistency with which teachers named how these opportunities affected their practice exemplifies the importance of this type of professional development opportunity at Explore Schools, which is consistent with previous research (Balli, 2011; Kelly, Gningue, & Qian, 2015). Teachers themselves identified the importance of this type of professional development for this setting, often mentioning that their previous experiences did not include preparation for managing an urban classroom. Laura Dawson put it frankly, saying, “in my entire student teaching experience, I didn’t have to worry about management. There just wasn’t a reason for it, so it didn’t exist” (L. Dawson, personal interview, January 21, 2016). Laura’s thoughts are indicative of the majority of this study’s participants and closely align with previous research that demonstrates the potential benefits of specialized classroom management
training when addressing the unique challenges associated with urban contexts (Balli, 2011; Kelly et al., 2015).

As the prior section demonstrates, Explore Schools leaders provided a wide variety of professional development opportunities during the 2015-2016 school year in an attempt to address these unique challenges and prepare their first-year teachers for this urban context. Teachers named two types of professional development opportunities related to classroom management more than all others as having an impact on their practice. The content of these opportunities, each described in detail below, includes maintaining emotional constancy during difficult moments and providing clear directions to students. After describing how teachers reported each of these types of professional development opportunities as influencing their practice, I conclude this section with an examination of the importance of the modality of professional development opportunities in relation to classroom management strategies.

**Emotional Constancy**

This type of professional development includes any opportunity within the area of classroom management that relates to teachers using specific strategies to prevent the possibility of anger occurring on the teacher’s or student’s part. In Teach Like a Champion, Doug Lemov describes techniques related to emotional constancy as being integral to an urban teacher’s success, as both children and adults are prone to make poor decisions when we are angry and urban environments typically have more situations that may cause anger (Lemov, 2014). Many participants in this study identified opportunities associated with emotional constancy as the most important opportunities they participated
in and could easily describe multiple examples of how these opportunities showed up in their practice. The opportunities in this area included coaching, pre-service workshops, and workshops that occurred during the year. Diana Hall described how a technique she learned during one of these opportunities influenced her practice:

My first year has been a really great challenge. The kids are testing us not only academically but making us have more patience because of the behaviors we see. One of the things that my principal was coaching me on was to "take a breath before you respond to a student." I do that often now. Doing this allows me to register what just happened and think of the appropriate way to respond rather than just being impulsive because, a lot of the times, if we are impulsive, it can come out negative. It can be detrimental. It can even reinforce the behavior that we want to see extinguished. (D. Hall, personal interview, January 25, 2016)

The strategy in this example comes from a situation in which a teacher was personally coached by one of her school leaders to use techniques related to emotional constancy. This type of coaching example came up in many interviews. Dana Willis shared a story of an academic director in her school coaching her on her tone of voice. She named that she would routinely get angry with student behavior and would raise her voice or use an angry tone in order to get the behavior she wanted more quickly (D. Willis, personal interview, January 26, 2016). Dana described how she knew that this was not an acceptable form of behavior management, but she needed a leader to help her with replacement strategies. Her academic director witnessed this angry tone and created a coaching plan that involved addressing the teacher’s difficulties with her tone. This teacher was still working on her tone at the time of my first interview and identified that it was no longer a problem for her by our second interview. She credited the coaching she received from her academic director as the reason for her success (D. Willis, personal interview, January 26, 2016; D. Willis, personal interview, June 16, 2016).
Another teacher, Trisha, shared an example of her academic director coaching her on the same emotional constancy techniques she had learned during the network’s pre-service. Trisha explained how she had been attempting to use some of the Love and Logic strategies she learned, but quickly abandoned them when they did not immediately work for her (T. Greggory, personal interview, January 21, 2016). She stated that, “my academic director saw that my classroom was out of control and I was getting angry, so she coached me on the Love and Logic strategies for a few weeks and they started working more for me” (T. Greggory, personal interview, January 21, 2016). Trisha saw a great deal of improvement in her classroom management over time and credits much of it to the coaching she received from her academic director on emotional constancy techniques. Each of these examples involves school leaders identifying a need through observation and addressing that need through a professional development opportunity tailored specifically for the observed teacher. Teachers also named professional development opportunities related to emotional constancy other than coaching that influenced their practice in the classroom.

For instance, many teachers provided examples of how pre-service professional development opportunities related to emotional constancy influenced their practice. One specific Love and Logic technique called the “broken record technique” showed up in many interviews. This technique entails the teacher calmly repeating an instruction over and over until the student follows the instruction (Fay & Funk, 1995). Katie Johnson described how it showed up in her classroom as follows:

I have some students that will get emotional or heated or, it’s 1st grade so they'll try and push and test. I learned to remain consistent with that tool of just calmly
saying, "Sit down, sit down. I asked you to sit down, I need you to sit down." It has been very effective, I don't get upset, they don't get upset, and I think where you just are very repetitive and without emotion, I think that's been the most effective. I use it every day. (K. Johnson, personal interview, January 28, 2016)

This teacher’s claim that she uses this technique every day was not abnormal among the participants of this study. The pre-service professional development opportunities related to emotional constancy came up frequently as having imparted techniques that had become a part of teachers’ everyday language in the classroom.

Some teachers also referenced emotional constancy techniques that were originally introduced during pre-service, but were not used until the same techniques came up again in an early-release workshop. Alex Eggers provided an example of this from her classroom:

There was another technique we learned about where you're saying you understand, and I still need you to do this. I remember they gave the example during pre-service, "I understand that you feel that way, and I know you can get up out of your seat." You’re showing that you empathize and that you still have an expectation. I forgot about some of those things. It was really helpful to learn about them again. I have one student who sometimes would keep his sweatshirt on. I would tell him over and over again, that he's got one more minute until he’s going to lose points. He just wouldn't take it off. I would end up hovering over him and we’d get into these huge fights before class even started. It was ruining our relationship. Then, after we had the training at school, I would use the strategy and say, "I understand that it's cold, and I expect that you're going to take it off," and then just walk away. He always took it off within the next two minutes. That was super helpful, being able to do that. (A. Eggers, personal interview, June 7, 2016)

Alex remembered the techniques she refers to from her pre-service professional development opportunities, but seemingly needed a reminder in order to feel comfortable experimenting with these techniques in her classroom. This helps us to understand the difficulty new teachers may have with immediately assimilating all of the techniques they
are exposed to during Explore’s pre-service. At least in this instance, learning the
technique an additional time while immersed in the context helped Alex to incorporate it
into her classroom practices.

Teachers named techniques related to emotional constancy more often as showing
up in their daily practice than techniques from most other professional development
opportunities. The examples in this section not only demonstrate the frequency with
which teachers named these opportunities, but also the variety of techniques related to
emotional constancy that teachers say they integrated into their daily practice. These
examples illustrate the many ways in which teachers report professional development
opportunities related to emotional constancy as influencing their practice. This finding
fits within my conceptual framework in that it adds texture to the notion that first-year
teachers in urban schools may benefit from professional development opportunities that
are tailored for urban contexts (Gaikhorst et al., 2014; Noel, 2010). In this case,
professional development opportunities related to emotional constancy seem to support
teachers in coping with the challenges related to managing classrooms that are specific to
urban contexts (Balli, 2011; Kelly et al., 2015; Nakai & Turley, 2003).

**Clear Directions**

The first-year teachers in this study frequently provided examples of how
professional development opportunities associated with another area of classroom
management, providing clear directions, influenced their practice. This category of
professional development opportunities includes any opportunity that aims to provide
teachers with practical strategies for proactively giving students clear directions in the
classroom. These strategies include techniques related to the wording, voice level, and specificity of directions. Most of the participants in this study named multiple examples of how this type of opportunity impacted their teaching practice. Some participants even named opportunities related to providing clear directions as the most important opportunities they participated in all year. One teacher, Francine Thomas, responded as follows when asked about which professional development opportunity from the year had the greatest impact on her instruction:

One hundred percent, I know the answer right away. It was the "what to do" directions PD. I literally have to use it every single day. For example, today I teach the same class three periods in a row, so the first one I didn’t use what I learned in “what to do” and I was like "Okay, turn your desks together" and they were just chaotic and they didn't know what to do, so in the following class, I was more specific like "Everyone in the front row, silently turn your desk toward the person behind you. You have ten seconds." Things like that and it went by much more smoothly, which is great. By far, that was the most helpful PD. (F. Thomas, personal interview, June 9, 2016)

The professional development opportunity that Francine refers to is part of the series of classroom management workshops adapted from Doug Lemov’s “Teach Like a Champion” (Lemov, 2014). The “what to do” workshop specifically targets teachers’ abilities to provide clear and concise directions in an effort to prevent classroom management problems before they occur (Lemov, 2014).

Participants in this study named the “what to do” workshop by name more often than any other workshop they participated in this year. Sarah Miller stated that without this workshop, she “wouldn’t have known to give students a specific amount of time to do something or that everything that goes into a transition needs to be explicitly explained and modeled” (S. Miller, personal interview, January 26, 2016). Jamie Chow
placed similar importance on this session, saying that the “what to do” workshop was “the most beneficial opportunity at pre-service because it was focused on transitions and giving clear and concise directions, which is something (she) immediately took into the classroom” (J. Chow, personal interview, June 14, 2016).

While teachers frequently reported the ways in which the content from the “what to do” workshop influenced their practice, other opportunities related to providing clear directions to students came up often as well. Regina Smith spoke of the coaching she received in this area:

> While I was being coached, I started by saying “sit properly,” but I wouldn’t get what I wanted until I would say “Sit up straight, put your feet flat, and your knees under your desk..” telling them every specific thing that they are going to do. It makes things extremely clear for them and it lets me know what I am missing.” (R. Smith, personal interview, January 15, 2016)

The coaching that Regina received seemed to aid her in speaking with the specificity she needed to use in order to get what she wanted from her students. Cindy Young had a similar experience. She received coaching from her academic director on giving clear and concise directions for the first two months of the school year. Cindy described multiple situations in which she would break large, vague directions down into small, concise statements and she would then see a much larger percentage of her students following her directions (C. Young, personal interview, January 19, 2016).

Teachers participated in professional development opportunities that focused on a wide variety of techniques for giving directions. One specific technique that many teachers seemed to take away from these opportunities involved utilizing silent signals or
non-verbal cues to provide directions. Sarah Miller provided the following example of how this showed up in her practice:

There was an incident where I was in a transition at the beginning of the year. I was lining kids up outside of the room and I was still getting to know my students, and a couple of them really started to challenge me. When we would get into the hallway, I would be like, "John, I need you to turn around. John, we don’t talk in the hallway." I found that the louder I was talking, the kids would either talk back to me, or their voices would start to rise. I thought back to the PD we had, and I started to use more non-verbals. Since then, even though he’s not always complying, it makes a big difference in the tone of the whole transition, and the other kids at least stay focused. It just seems like, okay, my voice is off, their voices are off. It's made a big difference. (S. Miller, personal interview, January 26, 2016)

Participants provided similar examples to Sarah’s that include classroom transitions and charging students with a specific task. Tamika Greggory mentioned that, after participating in an early-release professional development on giving clear directions, the whole tone of her classroom changed due to the clarity of her instructions and use of non-verbals. She stated that, “when students are coming to the rug and a student is sitting on their knees, instead of telling that student, ‘sit on your bottom,’ I just show them what to do, and they fix it quickly” (T. Greggory, personal interview, January 21, 2016). This example demonstrates the potential effectiveness of early-release workshops in aiding teachers to give directions in such a way that students react appropriately.

These examples represent a wide variety of professional development opportunities related to providing clear directions that teachers reported as influencing their practice. The impact of this type of classroom-management related professional development seemed to rise above most other opportunities named as part of this study. The examples in this section offer information related to this study’s second set of
research questions and speak to the importance of professional development strategies related to classroom management strategies for first-year teachers. This finding fits within my conceptual framework in that it adds further texture to the idea that first-year teachers in urban schools may benefit from professional development opportunities that are tailored for urban contexts (Gaikhorst et al., 2014; Noel, 2010). In this case, professional development opportunities related giving clear directions seem to support teachers in coping with the challenges related to managing classrooms that are specific to urban contexts (Balli, 2011; Kelly et al., 2015; Nakai & Turley, 2003).

**Modality Matters**

One important finding pertaining to the classroom-management related professional development opportunities the teachers in this study participated in involves the mode through which information was presented. As demonstrated by this study’s findings and described at the beginning of this chapter, first-year teachers at Explore Schools participate in a wide variety of professional development opportunities. These opportunities cover a great deal of content and involve a number of different modes of presentation. Examples of these modes include personal coaching, workshops, professional learning community meetings, peer-observation, reading professional books, and video reflection. When interviewing participants for this study, however, teachers named two of these modes much more often than others as causing changes that showed up in their daily classroom management practices.

Participants frequently named examples involving personal coaching and workshops, but provided very few examples that came from opportunities involving any
other mode of presentation for professional development related to classroom management. When actually calculated, more teachers provided examples that stemmed from the “Teach Like a Champion” workshops during pre-service than all of the other modes of professional development combined. No teacher in the study ever specifically articulated one mode of teacher-learning being more effective than any other, but it is important to note that the majority of the examples teachers provided regarding classroom management were related to these two modes of professional development. I return to this finding later in this chapter and analyze it in the overall context of how teachers reported the various opportunities as influencing their practice.

**Lesson Planning**

Most of the first-year teachers who participated in this study cited examples of how professional development opportunities related to lesson planning affected their daily teaching practice. This is an important finding because lesson planning represents one of the few academic areas in which most teachers could provide an example of how a professional development opportunity caused a change in their practice. Instead, first-year teachers largely focused on classroom management even when I specifically prompted them to provide me with examples related to academics. This is not entirely surprising, as previous research has examined the importance of classroom management to first-year teachers, especially in urban settings (Balli, 2011; Kelly et al., 2015).

I expected to hear many examples from participants about how the opportunities regarding planning for Explore’s new curricula showed up in their practice. I was surprised, however, to see a relatively equal distribution across subjects in the examples
teachers provided of how opportunities related to lesson-planning showed up in their practice. Because of this, I chose to organize this section according to the components of lesson-planning that first-year teachers most frequently identified as showing up in their practice. I begin this section with an examination of how this study’s participants reported opportunities related to lesson structure as influencing their practice and follow this with a discussion on how these teachers reported opportunities related to expectations of student work as influencing their practice.

Lesson Structure

Many first-year teachers described examples of how professional development regarding lesson structure showed up in their practice. This category includes anything related to how a lesson is organized and how this organization will impact what the teacher does in the classroom with students. Examples of this include how much time a teacher should spend on the various components of lessons such as the introduction, debrief, and summary, as well as what order different components of a specific lesson should be introduced. Each subject at Explore looks different with regard to the general expectations for these structures and teachers must often make judgment calls regarding how much time to spend on each component as well as which components to add or cut. Professional development opportunities related to lesson structure are designed to help a teacher’s ability to make these choices. Alex Eggers provided a good example of how the information from one of these opportunities showed up in her practice:

I think the lesson planning with EL (Expeditionary Learning), being able to work with the other sixth grade teachers from the other schools made a huge difference in the start of my year. They walked me through the different parts of the lesson and what each one looks like. Especially as a first year teacher, I had never
looked at a curriculum like that before. Debbie specifically, who's at Exceed, she was a huge help to me. I use a PowerPoint every day right now because she showed me which parts of the lesson PowerPoint works very well for. (A. Eggers, personal interview, June 7, 2016)

In this example, Alex refers to collaborative planning sessions she experienced during pre-service that she says affected her practice for the remainder of the year. Pre-service professional development opportunities pertaining to lesson planning came up frequently, as this was the time period when first-year teachers were being acquainted with Explore’s lesson planning structures. Katie Johnson noted that she “wouldn’t have had any idea how to sequence a lesson” without the pre-service lesson-planning sessions, while Pamela Cox stated that her undergraduate work “didn’t prepare (her) at all for the type of lesson planning that charter schools expect” (K. Johnson, personal interview, January 28, 2016; P. Cox, personal interview, January 14, 2016). This data exemplifies the importance that first-year teachers placed on the training they received before the school year began.

Many participants also provided examples of how content from professional development opportunities related to lesson structure from throughout the year influenced their practice. Carolyn Bernstein provided the following example of how she would routinely take advantage of opportunities that would aid her in knowing how to modify the structure to fit the amount of time she had for a lesson:

You only have 45 minutes, 4 times a week. The lessons are designed for small group 1 hour. Right there, you already have to cut out 15 minutes and then you have to think about your students and what they can handle before they go off for work time. It's a lot trying to figure out, "Okay, but I think this part's important, but what about this?" Trying to manage what can go and what can't. Our PLC leader would help me and the other new teachers a lot with this, especially at the beginning of the school year. After our PLC sessions, I would know exactly what
to cut out of a lesson and my lessons would make a lot more sense to the kids. (C. Bernstein, personal interview, June 7, 2016)

Many teachers described similar examples in their own practice. There was a consistent trend in the data of teachers receiving help during a PLC or personal coaching session that would lead to them cutting out portions of lessons and deciding how the various pieces fit together once an item was cut. Maggie Hunter stated that, “the curriculum package had way too much to teach in the amount of time we had. My reading class was a disaster until I received coaching from our academic coordinator on what to take out and what to leave in” (M. Hunter, personal interview, June 7, 2016). Many teachers agreed with Maggie’s impression of the amount of materials they received for the reading curricula, often citing help they needed in order to figure out what to teach. This helps us to understand how opportunities related to interpreting pre-created materials and editing them for one’s own setting can potentially have a positive effect on a first-year teacher’s practice.

Participants in this study named many ways in which professional development opportunities regarding lesson structure showed up in their daily practice. The examples in this section demonstrate the variety of opportunities that teachers reported as influencing their classroom practice and serve to provide information directly related to my second set of research questions. Teachers reported that these opportunities generally allowed for altered lessons with more logical sequences and better-allocated allotments of time.
Expectations of Student Work

Participants in this study described several ways in which professional development opportunities associated with the expectations for their students’ work influenced their practice. One component of lesson planning entails knowing exactly what you want your students to be able to accomplish during and after a lesson. Explore teachers often refer to students’ “work products,” which consist of the products that students create as a result of the learning that occurs during a lesson (D. Willis, personal interview, June 16, 2016; L. Dawson, personal interview, January 21, 2016). Several teachers named a difficulty with knowing exactly what level of work they should expect from students and explained how professional development opportunities at Explore helped them with this difficulty. Pamela Cox described the following in reference to a student-work focused PLC:

I think it impacted my instruction because I had a clearer understanding of what I was supposed to be getting from the kids. We talked a lot about what the ideal answer would be and what we're looking for kids to be able to write. It impacted my instruction because I knew what I was looking for from the students so I had a better sense of how to communicate what I'm trying to teach them, rather than me just standing there and spewing out words. So I think that was definitely helpful. (P. Cox, personal interview, June 17, 2016)

This helps us to learn about how this type of opportunity can impact instruction because it provides the teacher with a sense of what the students’ end product should look like.

Several participants shared Pamela’s views regarding the helpfulness of student-work focused PLC meetings. Laura Dawson stated, “I had no idea what grade-level work looked like. I knew what the smartest kid in my class could do, but I didn’t know how that compared to what a kid this age should be able to do” (L. Dawson, personal
interview, June 16, 2016). Laura went on to explain that she would examine student work products with her coach, who had previous experience working with students at the same grade level. This coach helped her to identify exactly what she should be expecting from her students at the end of each lesson. Laura reported that her lessons improved, as did her students’ engagement, because she was doing better at basing her lessons on work products that were reasonable for her students’ grade-level (L. Dawson, personal interview, June 16, 2016). Laura’s story demonstrates the multi-layered effect that professional development opportunities pertaining to student work can have. Not only did these opportunities seem to aid Laura in knowing what appropriate student work looked like, but she also reported changes in her instruction as well as her students’ engagement.

While not as many participants identified the ways in which student-work focused professional development showed up in their practice as identified lesson structure, this is still an important finding because of the impact this professional development seemed to have on many teachers’ work. Several participants, including those quoted above, described how these professional development opportunities affected the way in which they teach. They reported starting the year with little to no knowledge of the level of work they should expect from their students, which inhibited them from planning their lessons in a way that pushed students to learn new material (L. Dawson, personal interview, June 16, 2016; D. Willis, personal interview, June 16, 2016). After participating in professional development opportunities associated with expectations of student work, this study’s participants reported ways in which their lessons were altered.
These examples, combined with those related to lesson structure, exemplify the teacher-reported impact that professional development opportunities related to lesson planning may have on teachers’ practice. Teachers identified ways in which these opportunities were connected with altered instruction as well as improved student engagement due to the impact that the information from these opportunities had on the teachers’ approach to lesson planning. The findings discussed in this section serve to show the many ways that teachers reported these opportunities showing up in their practice as well as to provide information related to this study’s second set of research questions.

**Not Learning**

The third question in my second set of research questions seeks to gather and analyze data on what teachers report they are not learning through the various professional development opportunities they participate in at Explore Schools. Entering this study, I questioned whether first-year teachers have the experience one needs to identify sophisticated areas in which they need to grow as teachers. My conjecture was that they “don’t know what they don’t know.” The participants in this study, however, clearly articulated many areas in which they believe Explore Schools failed to adequately prepare them for the school year as well as areas in which they desired to focus their ongoing development. The following section is organized according to the major trends I found as I analyzed the data pertaining to what teachers reported they are not learning from Explore’s professional development opportunities. I begin by examining a trend of many teachers feeling as though there was inadequate preparation for the type of student...
behavior they would see when the school year started. Next, I discuss the professional
development opportunities teachers desire with regard to students with severe behavioral
issues. Following this I describe the professional development regarding family
interactions that teachers identified as missing. Finally, I briefly examine the areas that
teachers did not name when discussing what is missing from Explore’s professional
development opportunities.

**Realistic Expectations**

More than two-thirds of this study’s participants identified feeling as though they
received inadequate pre-service preparation with regard to the behavior they would later
see from students in their classrooms. While the findings earlier in this chapter speak to
ways in which professional development opportunities may be impacting the classroom
management practices of Explore’s first year teachers, many teachers named feeling ill-
prepared for the severity of misbehavior they would encounter in their classrooms.

Participants shared that students often directly disobeyed instructions, spoke
disrespectfully, and even acted violently. For example, Francine Thomas shared the
following story that illustrates this trend:

One of the things that we are working on right now as a school is getting kids into
uniform, so you would expect to say to a child "Take off your hoodie", and then
they just do it, but it usually becomes a fight. Today, there were five kids in the
classroom who just would not take off their hoodies no matter how many times I
said it or what strategies I tried and the dean came in and he told them one time
and they took it off and as soon as he walked out, they put it right back on. I was
just like "What is happening right now? What is it about me that you are not
listening to?" None of the strategies I tried were working and it was really
frustrating, but that is one example that happened today. (F. Thomas, personal
interview, January 25, 2016)
Francine’s story illustrates the divide between what she expected to work and what would actually work with her students. Before entering the classroom, Francine expected students to simply fall into line and follow her instructions when she reminded them of the school’s expectations. The reality, however, was much more complicated than this. Francine reported that her students overtly ignored her instructions and treated her authority differently than that of school administrators.

Most of the participants in this study shared stories similar to Francine’s. These stories routinely involved teachers futilely utilizing strategies they learned during Explore’s pre-service, only to end up in a spot where they did not have the knowledge to know what to do next. Diana Hall described how she “couldn’t get (her) students to be quiet long enough to listen to (her) instructions, even on the first day of school” and Cindy Martin “went through every strategy she learned” with no success (D. Hall, personal interview, January 25, 2016; C. Young, personal interview, January 19, 2016).

Interestingly, teachers only rarely named needing more strategies for the situations described here. Instead, teachers repeatedly mentioned a desire for a clearer picture of what student behavior would look like in their classroom before the year started. Alex Eggers stated, “I wish I would have seen some videos of things going really poorly, just so I had some sense of what I may be looking at so that I could start to figure out how to fix it” (A. Eggers, personal interview, January 22, 2016). Alex’s wish for a video showed up in many other interviews as well. There seemed to be a general sentiment that, while learning behavioral management strategies during pre-service was helpful, it would have been more helpful if teachers were familiar with the exact
behaviors for which they were preparing themselves. Pre-service facilitators often asked teachers to practice the management strategies they were learning in an attempt to familiarize teachers with how to use the strategies in a classroom and give them a realistic look at when the strategies would be most useful. There were no children at pre-service, however, so teachers often practiced the strategies they were learning with other adults. Maggie Felder described how this actually worked to her detriment:

> Classroom management is a crazy issue for me. Right now it is getting better, but I was definitely not prepared. When we were practicing during pre-service, we are practicing with other adults who were following our directions. They followed directions the first time you said something and when you get in the classroom and somebody says "No, I am not doing that", you are like "Okay, now what do I do? Someone is refusing to do what I say." It is a shocking thing that happens every day. (M. Hunter, personal interview, January 21, 2016)

Maggie’s story repeats itself over and over again in the interview data for this study. In coding data associated with this trend, I chose the code “reality” because a large number of participants explained how unrealistic leaders and facilitators were about the behaviors teachers would see in the classroom once the year started. No trend existed about any mistrust of the strategies teachers learned. Instead, teachers desired a realistic picture of what they were getting themselves into so they would know when to use each strategy. Regina Smith perfectly exemplified the trend seen across many interviews in saying, “I wish people had been more realistic about student culture. A lot of the management sessions in pre-service were very helpful, but having realistic examples and practicing worst-case scenarios would have made it better” (R. Smith, personal interview, January 15, 2016). Regina’s story, along with the wealth of teachers who reported that
they did not learn what behavior in their classrooms would look like, provides information directly in service of this study’s second set of research questions.

**Outliers**

Explore, like many urban school systems serving high-poverty populations, serves a large number of students who consistently show extreme behaviors. Many of these students have been classified as “emotionally disturbed” by a medical doctor according to their individual education plans (Explore Schools Special Education Document, 2015). Teachers and leaders at Explore Schools use many terms to describe these students who consistently show extreme behaviors in the classroom. These terms include outliers, high-fliers, and “students we love the most.” The first-year teachers involved in this study used these terms and more as the majority of them reported that they had not yet learned how to effectively manage and teach these students in their classrooms.

This finding may initially seem redundant with the previous subsection, but it differs in a very important way. The previous subsection focused on participants’ desire to be provided with a realistic picture of the behaviors they would see in the classroom before the school-year begins. The finding I describe in this section focuses on the participants’ reports of not learning how to manage and teach outlier students in their classrooms. Specifically, teachers reported not knowing what to do when particular students consistently displayed extreme behaviors that would put their safety or others’ safety at risk.

All participants generally kept a very positive attitude when discussing their “outlier” students, as they often expressed worry and fear instead of any kind of anger or
frustration. Maggie’s story below about one of her first-grade students exemplifies this trend perfectly:

Tyler was a very aggressive scholar in the beginning. He pulled hair, hit others, ran away. It was very scary…I was very worried. I was frightened and he came into our classroom about two months in. Our classroom was set and then it’s kind of like this new thing throwing everything off and I was very really worried. I was very worried for him. How are we supposed to teach him if he won't even stay in the classroom? Now one of us is outside the classroom more than we were inside the classroom. It became very worrisome. (M. Hunter, personal interview, June 7, 2016)

Maggie’s story shows similar qualities to what many teachers reported with regard to their outlier students. Teachers often witness violence and extreme aggression from these students and are left wondering what to do. Katie Johnson described one of her students aggressively throwing a pencil case at the whiteboard in the middle of a lesson. The students sitting near the board were showered with pencils as they fell to the ground (K. Johnson, personal interview, January 28, 2016). Dana Willis told a story of a student’s outburst in which her 7th grade student screamed curses and racial remarks at her in front of her class (D. Willis, personal interview, June 16, 2016). A great degree of variety existed among the stories teachers told of outlier students. Common themes in this study’s data included violence, aggression, and teachers who felt as if nobody had told them what to do in these situations.

The participants in this study articulated numerous strategies they tried with outlier students, many of which they learned during general classroom management sessions at their school or during pre-service. Paige Walker shared the following story about when she attempted to use an in-class incentive system with one of their third-grade outlier students:
In the beginning of the year, Aiden got a clip moved down to red. I said, "Okay, you're going to lunch. Reset, and let's have a good afternoon." I went down and I picked him up from lunch and he was like, "I did good." I was like, "Okay good," but because I didn't move his clip up immediately, Aiden decided to kick another student the entire way up the stairs. I talked with him and moved him to another place in line. Then when we got in the hallway he kept doing it to a different student. I enter the room and Aiden followed the student in, cornered him, and attacked him. It was just me in the room with him. I was like I can't ignore the rest of the class and I don't know what to do. I'm trying to pull him. I think in that situation, what do I do? I ended up getting one of the dean's help, but even she was like “I don't know what to do right now.” (P. Walker, personal interview, January 25, 2016)

The various moves Paige tried in this short story, including using an incentive system and moving the student in line, demonstrate Paige’s attempts at using the strategies she learned through her classroom-management focused professional development opportunities. Participants described similar attempts at using strategies to prevent outlier students from exhibiting extreme behaviors in many interviews. Most participants, however, named that these strategies were not enough because their outlier students would continue to display extreme behaviors and the teachers would rarely be able to prevent or immediately stop the behavior once it started. Participants consistently desired additional professional development on how to best manage and teach outlier students because they reported this as something they did not learn through Explore’s current professional development structures. This consistent desire among this study’s participants provides information in direct service of this study’s second set of research questions.

Family Interaction

Many of this study’s participants reported that they had not learned how to interact with students’ families during their first year of teaching. This finding is
particularly interesting because there was no mention of any professional development opportunities pertaining to family interaction in any of the dozens Explore Schools documents I examined for this study. This, combined with the interview data I collected, leads me to believe that Explore did not provide any professional development opportunities in this area during the 2015-2016 school year. The first-year teachers in this study mentioned this lack of professional development often and told many emotional stories of the various interactions they had with their students’ families.

Tamika Greggory’s school focused on family engagement as one of their priorities this year, but as the following quote shows, Tamika did not feel prepared for this priority:

I think for myself, this is my first year and there are certain things that grad school prepares you for and then there are certain things that grad school doesn't even hit upon. We have a big push for family involvement this year and I think some PD around that would be really good. Like I struggle, how do you message to a parent that their child's in doubt of promotion. How do you speak to parents about these difficult subjects? That's something that I was very anxious around parent teacher conferences because I just didn't know how to message these things appropriately and I think that's definitely not something that you're taught in grad school. I would like PD about that. (T. Greggory, personal interview, January 21, 2016)

The questions Tamika raised were asked many times in many different ways throughout my interviews. Parent conferences caused a particularly emotional reaction among many of the first-year teachers in this study. Pamela Cox stated, “I’m terrified of parents. Parent conferences were the most stressful thing ever. Someone told me that parents are as nervous as you because you’re telling them about their kids, but I don’t believe it. Parents make me so nervous” (P. Cox, personal interview, January 14, 2016).
Participants connected much of this anxiety and fear regarding parent interaction to a lack of professional development in this area. The leaders at Explore Schools tasked teachers with engaging families on many difficult subjects without a great deal of preparation. The first-year teachers in this study mentioned speaking with students’ parents about subjects such as low academic performance, misbehavior, and even retention in the same grade. Carolyn Bernstein shared the following thoughts on a conversation she had with a parent regarding a child’s low academic performance.

I actually just had a parent come in and the student is really far behind academically and his promotion is in doubt and I just didn't really know what to say. Not only know what to say but it's difficult for me since this is my first year to explain why this is good for their child. (C. Bernstein, personal interview, June 7, 2016)

In addition to not feeling prepared to discuss these difficult subjects, many teachers identified that they had not learned how to navigate conversations in which the parent becomes aggressive toward the teacher or child. While not extremely common, it is not unheard of for a parent to blame a student’s performance on the teacher or to scream at or even hit their child in front of a teacher during a conference. Dana Willis provided the following example of a parent blaming her for the student’s poor reading grade.

I had one father sit down, look at his child's reading grade and say to me, "Who's fault is this?" The student is in fifth grade. He's supposed to be reading since Kindergarten. I've had him for about two months by now, so I don't know how much growth you're expecting to see in those two months when we haven't started guided reading yet. I had no idea how to handle this conversation. (D. Willis, personal interview, January 26, 2016).

In speaking with Dana, I found out that her school had not provided any professional development with regard to navigating this type of conversation. Not only was she not
prepared with the knowledge of what to do in this type of situation, she also felt blind-sided that a parent would approach her in this way. She described the professional development opportunity she desired in this area as one that would include the types of things parents may say to you as well as how to handle each type of situation (D. Willis, personal interview, January 26, 2016). Dana was not alone in this desire, as more than half of this study’s participants named a desire for some version of professional development on interacting with students’ parents.

The stories participants told regarding interactions with parents varied greatly, but offered consistent evidence for a lack for professional development in this area. One participant explained that she did not know what to do when a parent cried in front of her, while another felt lost when a parent asked for parenting advice (K. Johnson, personal interview, January 28, 2016; R. Smith, personal interview, January 15, 2016). Some stories were more extreme than others, such as Diana’s story below, which exemplifies a potential need for professional development about what is reportable with regard to parent behavior.

"A lot of our parents’ responses to things or the way that they handle things at home are not what I’m used to or what I was brought up with. You know, just different cultures. That was something that was so hard for me to wrap my head around, specifically, a lot of my kids, if they do something bad at home, their parents hit them and are very open about it. "I gave him a beating last night ..." The first time I heard that, I was like, "What? What do you mean?"" (D. Hall, personal interview, January 25, 2016)

This story may not immediately constitute charges of abuse, but Diana reported not knowing what to say in response to this parent as well as not having a clear picture of
where the line is regarding what a parent can say to a teacher before it should be flagged to a social worker in the school (D. Hall, personal interview, January 25, 2016).

Diana’s story, along with the others shared in this section, exemplifies an area in which this study’s participants consistently reported not having learned what they needed to know from Explore’s professional development opportunities. Many parent interactions proved to be difficult for Explore’s first-year teachers, as they were left without the information or experience they needed to meaningfully interact with parents on difficult topics. I did not expect this finding and it was not part of this study’s conceptual framework, however, studies demonstrate this phenomenon not to be specific to Explore Schools. Research shows that teachers rarely receive training on how to interact with parents despite a seemingly wide-spread desire for more professional development in this area among teachers (Lemmer, 2012; Pillet-Shore, 2016). The participants in this study were no exception to this desire and this finding clearly contributes information in service of this study’s second set of research questions.

**Missing: Academics**

The preceding findings regarding what teachers report they are not learning from the professional development opportunities at Explore Schools do not include anything strictly academic in nature. This is not due to any intentional decision on my part to omit this information, rather, teachers focused heavily on non-academic examples when discussing what they were not learning from Explore’s professional development opportunities. Even when specifically prompted to provide me with information about what they were not learning from their academically-focused professional development
opportunities, teachers often gave vague answers and quickly reverted to discussing their struggles with classroom management or other non-academic areas. Additionally, very few trends existed among participants with regard to what they were not learning from academically-oriented professional development opportunities.

For example, when probing this area with Sarah Miller, she initially answered that she is not learning enough about “content,” and when I probed deeper, she explained that she felt as though she did not learn enough about “math content” during the professional development opportunities in which she participated (S. Miller, personal interview, June 14, 2016). Sarah was then unable to describe exactly how this affected her classroom teaching (S. Miller, personal interview, June 14, 2016). While responses like Sarah’s certainly add potential information related to my second research question, the lack of specificity combined with a lack of general trends among participants in this area led to me not including anything academic in nature in this section of my findings. I note this absence here, however, because I believe it is a finding in and of itself. This finding may be partially explained by the analysis in the following section.

This study’s participants shared a great deal about what they are not learning through the professional development opportunities they participate in at Explore Schools. Specifically, teachers reported that they had not learned about the types of student behavior they would see in their classrooms, how to manage students with severe behavioral issues, and how to interact with students’ families. The information in this section illustrates the trends regarding these findings and serves to provide information directly related my second research question.
Why Some Opportunities Influence Practice More Than Others

Much of this chapter focused on the various ways in which teachers reported professional development opportunities as influencing their practice. While this information is certainly valuable in isolation, it also leads one to question why teachers seem to focus on some opportunities more than others when describing ways in which these experiences affect their practice. For instance, nearly all of this study’s participants volunteered ways in which Explore’s “what to do” workshop influenced their practice, while nearly nobody named ways in which book clubs affected their practice. The table below illustrates the number of times teachers volunteered ways in which various professional development opportunities influenced their practice during this study. It is organized by the categories introduced in chapter four. I explain more about this method of organization later in this section. I use this section to dig deeper into this data as well as to analyze the trends that emerge when examining how teachers described their preferences among professional development opportunities through the lens of the categories introduced in chapter four.
Table 3. *Number of Times Opportunities Identified by Category*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Opportunities Included</th>
<th>Number of Times Identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
|          | Educational Knowledge Building | • Pre-service academic workshops  
          |                                          | • School-wide system workshops  
          |                                          | • PLC instructional analysis  
          |                                          | • Book clubs  
          |                                          | • Co-observation related to teacher development plans  
          |                                          | • Content-based workshops  | 38 |
|          | Product Creation | • Collaborative lesson planning  
          |                                          | • Analyzing student work  
          |                                          | • Co-planning with a leader  
          |                                          | • Collaborative lesson planning workshops  
          |                                          | • Data-driven planning workshops  
          |                                          | • Data analysis workshops  | 42 |
| Immediate Implementation | Quickly-learned strategies | • Pre-service classroom culture workshops  
          |                                          | • Early-release classroom management workshops  | 102 |
|          | Responsive to Teacher Needs | • Video reflection  
          |                                          | • Observation and feedback  | 85 |

**Reasons for Influence**

In the previous chapter, I introduced four subcategories as a lens through which one can examine Explore’s professional development offerings. Two of these subcategories involve professional development opportunities focused on educational knowledge building, while the other two focus on strategies that can be immediately implemented by a teacher. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, when discussing opportunities related to classroom management, teachers most frequently provided examples from just two different types of opportunities. Specifically, teachers described examples related to coaching and classroom management workshops more than any other types of opportunities. Combined with the knowledge that teachers provided examples related to classroom management far more than any other types of professional
development, it becomes important to examine why teachers gravitated toward discussing these types of opportunities.

Using the aforementioned categories as a lens, the opportunities teachers focused on mostly tend to fall into the subcategories that offer strategies that can be immediately implemented. Coaching, for example, includes observation and feedback, which falls into the “responsive to teacher needs” subcategory. This type of professional development typically entails a leader providing a teacher with specific, quickly implemented strategies in reaction to a lesson observation (Teacher Development Plans, 2015). Similarly, classroom management workshops fall into the “quickly-learned strategies” category because they usually consist of techniques that teachers can insert into their daily practice relatively quickly (Explore Schools Early Release Calendar, 2015; Supporting Talent at Explore Schools, 2015). Overall, teachers provided far more examples that fit into these two subcategories than they did for the knowledge building subcategories. This trend can be seen clearly in table three. This may mean that teachers leaned toward providing the examples they provided in part because the information from these opportunities could be immediately implemented in their teaching practice. This same trend seems to also show up when digging deeper into how teachers explained why they chose to speak about specific opportunities as well.

The interview protocols used for this study did not overtly question the participants on why certain opportunities seemed to influence their practice more than others, but it is possible to discern this to some degree from what the participants said in
response to other questions. Carolyn Bernstein shared the following story about a moment when she received coaching from one of her school leaders:

At first, I was counting down like “everyone three, two, one eyes on me.” I wasn't narrating, "Oh you followed directions. Thank you for doing that so quickly. You're perfect. Oh look at him; he has his hands folded." Meredith was like, "Why don't you try positively narrating next time?" I tried it later in the day and the kids followed my directions right away. I was shocked at how quickly this advice changed the behavior in my class. (C. Bernstein, personal interview, January 15, 2016)

Carolyn’s example demonstrates a moment when she learned a new technique during a coaching session and witnessed the results of implementing this new technique on the same day she learned it. This shows us that Carolyn felt as if this coaching had an immediate impact on her teaching and this could be why Carolyn chose to share this story.

Still, we cannot know for sure that Carolyn chose to name this example because she found the information to be quickly implemented in her practice. The emphasis she places on how quickly this coaching worked, however, seems to demonstrate the value she places on the quick-working nature of this professional development opportunity. Additionally, this example contributes to the overwhelmingly lopsided number of examples teachers provided that fit inside the immediate implementation category of professional development instead of the educational knowledge building category. In the following example, Laura Dawson is a bit more overt about naming why she found a specific opportunity to be more helpful than others.

We had a professional development with Ms. Smith and Mr. Johnson, which was about collaborative problem solving, so CPS. It was really helpful because it gave a concrete strategy on how to talk to some scholars that may be exhibiting a behavior that you notice is continuous and never seems to end. Giving us those
strategies in a clear step by step procedure on how to talk to them and try resolving the problem was really helpful. I think this was the most helpful because I could literally start using CPS right away. I find myself using it every day now. (L. Dawson, personal interview, January 21, 2016)

Laura’s story provides us with a clear answer to the question of why Laura found this opportunity to be so helpful. The workshop Laura refers to falls under the immediate implementation category, as it is a classroom management workshop that focuses on concrete strategies. By overtly stating that she found this opportunity to be helpful because she could use it right away, Laura contributes evidence for why she focused on this opportunity rather than an opportunity that fell into the educational knowledge building category.

These examples, combined with the lens of the two emergent categories and four subcategories regarding Explore’s professional development opportunities, provide us with a possible explanation for why the teachers in this study seemed to gravitate toward discussing some professional development opportunities over others. While there were a few exceptions, this study’s participants appeared to favor discussing opportunities that provided them with information that could be immediately implemented instead of information that added to their big-picture body of knowledge. This trend also seems to show up when examining the professional development opportunities Explore’s teachers identify as missing, as displayed in the following section.

**Reasons for Missing Opportunities**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, participants identified three primary areas in which they found professional development at Explore to fall short. They stated that they would have liked to have a clearer picture of student behavior before the year started,
better training on how to support outlier students, and more training on how to handle interactions with families. It is difficult to immediately discern which of the four subcategories each of these would fall into, as these needs could potentially be addressed through various types of professional development opportunities. It becomes easier, however to analyze this data using the four subcategories as a lens when one actually examines how participants described this professional development they perceived to be missing.

For example, I shared the following quote from Maggie Hunter earlier in this section to describe Maggie’s desire for a clearer picture of what student behavior will look like in her classroom.

> When we were practicing during pre-service, we are practicing with other adults who were following our directions. They followed directions the first time you said something and when you get in the classroom and somebody says "No, I am not doing that", you are like "Okay, now what do I do? Someone is refusing to do what I say." It is a shocking thing that happens every day. (M. Hunter, personal interview, January 21, 2016)

Maggie’s main point in sharing this story was to emphasize that she believed that Explore’s leaders should find a way to provide her with a clear picture of what behavior looks like in her classroom before the year begins. Examining this more closely, however, reveals something else Maggie seems to be asking for. In asking “Okay, now what do I do,” Maggie seems to offer a desire for an immediate fix to this situation. This would lead one to believe that the professional development she is describing here could fall into the responsive to needs category, thereby demonstrating that she is looking for strategies that can be immediately implemented.
Regina Smith went a step further than Maggie when describing the type of professional development opportunities she found to be missing. Regina offered the following explanation for how, exactly, she would like a professional development to look like that aided in preparing her for supporting outlier students.

This is the approach that I want. Realistic strategies that we can take and really stop extreme behaviors from happening. A lot of people will think like, "Oh, the kids are so loving." They are. Then a switch can go off and they can get negative sometimes towards you and others. I think knowing what to do in the moment and really understanding, "Okay, this is what you have to do first when this child does something extreme." That’s what we need. (R. Smith, personal interview, January 15, 2016)

Regina’s explanation is very helpful in analyzing what types of professional development opportunities first-year teachers at Explore may desire. She describes wanting concrete, practical strategies that can be utilized quickly in moments of need. These are the types of strategies more likely to be shared during professional development opportunities that fall into the two “immediately implemented” subcategories than the knowledge building subcategories. This provides further evidence in support of the idea that first-year teachers at Explore may favor opportunities that provide them with techniques that can be quickly implemented as part of their practice.

This trend seems to continue when analyzing why first-year teachers want additional support in communicating with students’ families. Several participants candidly explained the type of professional development they thought they would benefit from in this area. Maggie Hunter named a desire for a workshop that would provide her with “tips on the language she can use to talk to parents.” Diana Hall expressed wanting development regarding how to “de-escalate a parent when they are upset.” Both of these
teachers seem to be describing opportunities in which they could learn strategies that they could implement in their next conversation with a student’s parent. Most of the teachers who expressed a need for additional development in this area had similar desires. When analyzing the language they use, both Maggie and Diana are likely looking for quick fixes rather than big-picture knowledge development. This means that the professional development opportunities they would seem to prefer in this area would fall into the immediately implementation category of professional development. These examples provide additional evidence for a connection between the professional development opportunities first-year teachers seem to mostly focus on and the potential for those opportunities to offer strategies that can immediately impact their practice. With a few exceptions, this trend may offer an explanation for why teachers chose the particular stories of professional development experiences they shared for this study. I return to this finding in chapter seven with a discussion of how schools could possibly use this information to change professional development structures.
CHAPTER SIX: SUPPORTING AND INHIBITING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This section provides information related to the third set of research questions:

“What are the aspects of Explore that support and/or inhibit how first-year teachers experience professional development? What can this help us understand about the context of urban charter schools more broadly?” The first-year teachers in this study offered more information on this research question than I originally anticipated. I initially assumed that, because these teachers are so early in their careers, they would find difficulty in identifying the aspects of their school that supported or inhibited how they were experiencing professional development. The participants surprised me, however, by easily naming ways in which their school environment affected their experiences of professional development. They offered ample data regarding the aspects of these urban charter schools that they believe to support and/or inhibit how first-year teachers experience professional development in this setting.

I use this section to describe the three major trends in this area from the data. I begin by discussing how the wide range of professional development opportunities generally offered in urban charter schools supports how teachers experience professional development. Next, I describe the positive mindset regarding growth that exists at Explore Schools and how this mindset supports teachers’ experiences of professional development opportunities in this setting. Finally, I examine the busy lives that first-year teachers in urban charter schools lead and how their demanding schedules inhibit how they experience professional development.
Range of Opportunities

Charter school leaders in urban areas across the country seem to utilize a wide variety of professional development opportunities (Stetson, 2013). These opportunities include intensive workshops, academic coaching, observation feedback, professional learning communities, and university partnerships (Lacina et al., 2006; R. Lake et al., 2012; Radoslovich et al., 2014; Robelen, 2007; Stetson, 2013). Explore Schools is no different. The first section of this chapter exemplifies the wide variety of professional development opportunities offered to first-year teachers in this school system. Many of this study’s participants identified this range of opportunities as the aspect of their urban charter school that supports their overall experience of professional development more than any other aspect.

Some participants used their knowledge of what their friends are experiencing in other schools as a comparison point to make sense of how Explore’s range of opportunities supports their experience. Carolyn Bernstein offered the following when asked about her experience regarding professional development at Explore Schools:

One of my friends is a sixth, seventh, and eighth grade math teacher up in Albany in a Catholic school. I went to Catholic school all my life so I’m used to Catholic school. She was saying that like they don't get opportunities for professional development. They have to do it on their own. They only had one day before Thanksgiving that they had a full day of professional development and other than that, they get nothing. In that sense, we definitely have more opportunities. I can’t imagine surviving this year with only one day of PD. (C. Bernstein, personal interview, June 7, 2016)

Carolyn’s sentiments were pervasive among this study’s participants. The majority named the number and variety of opportunities they are offered as a support in how they experience professional development at Explore Schools. In further support of
this point, while many teachers could name specific content that was not represented well in Explore’s professional development offerings, no teacher ever named a lack of variety as an inhibiting factor in how they experience professional development. Ultimately, the variety of professional development opportunities offered at Explore may lead to a more tailored experience for teachers because teachers can choose to focus their attention more on opportunities that they feel are immediately pertinent to their practice. This finding fits into this study’s conceptual framework, as it provides evidence for the connections that may exist between teacher learning and professional development opportunities that are tailored for teachers’ level of experience and the setting in which they teach (Abbate-Vaughn, 2006; Balli, 2011; Matsko & Hammerness, 2013).

In addition to generally naming that the variety and amount of professional development opportunities supported their experiences of professional development, many teachers went a step deeper and provided specific examples. Laura Dawson stated, “None of my friends that are first-year teachers right now had anything close to the pre-service that we had here, and I think if I didn't have that pre-service, I don't know how I would function in a classroom” (L. Dawson, personal interview, June 16, 2016). Diana Hall said, “Wednesday early release is so helpful. It takes into consideration that we need time for these professional developments” (D. Hall, personal interview, January 25, 2016). Sarah Miller spoke about a unique professional development opportunity she was exposed to at Explore: “Next week I'm going to the TC workshop and that's one the school recommended. They brought that to me and encouraged me to apply. I've heard really good things about it and I'm sure it's going to be really effective and really helpful”
These quotes show us that this study’s participants each valued different parts of their professional development experience. While there are themes among the types of opportunities teachers found to be most valuable, the variety of opportunities alone may contribute to a feeling of the opportunities being more tailored. This variety could also potentially allow teachers to focus on opportunities that were the most helpful for them at any given time.

The comments in this section represent only a few of the many different opportunities teachers identified when speaking about how the variety of opportunities at Explore Schools supports their experience of professional development at this urban charter school. Some teachers expressed that, while not every opportunity was beneficial, the variety of opportunities at Explore aided them in feeling like they were constantly growing during their first year of teaching (D. Willis, personal interview, June 16, 2016; P. Cox, personal interview, June 17, 2016). This data clearly contributes information in service of the third research question by demonstrating how the variety of professional development opportunities that Explore offers may be connected with teachers’ overall experiences of professional development.

**Growth Stance**

This study’s participants often identified a common stance regarding professional growth as another aspect of their urban charter school that supported their experience of professional development. Specifically, the first-year teachers in this study frequently described instances during which they were made to feel comfortable about their professional growth goals because of the open dialogue that exists around professional
growth among everyone in the organization, regardless of position or amount of experience (C. Young, personal interview, January 19, 2016; J. Chow, personal interview, June 14, 2016). Teachers reported this dialogue as consisting of open conversations between all adults in the school, including teachers and administrators, about the professional areas in which they are trying to improve. In contrast to an environment where growth areas are a private subject, teachers describe Explore as a place where they can feel comfortable discussing things they are simply not good at yet. Multiple participants referenced Explore’s operating values as proof of this stance (P. Cox, personal interview, June 17, 2016; D. Willis, personal interview, June 16, 2016). Leaders consistently discuss these four operating values with their teachers and you can see them posted in various places around each of Explore’s schools. The relevant value reads, “we are flexible and reflective” with sub-bullets reading, “readiness to try new ideas, reflect on past performance and alter course as needed,” and “engage in activities to foster professional growth and continuous improvement” (Explore Schools Operating Values, 2015).

Many schools may have similar values hanging on their walls, but Explore’s leaders seem to work hard to make these values live in their schools. Participants frequently used the exact language from these values in their interviews when referring to the environment at Explore Schools. Participants also provided many examples of this stance regarding professional growth at Explore Schools. Dana Willis shared the following in response to a question about what supports her in experiencing professional development in her school:
The common mindset that we are all going to be getting better at this and everyone is going to be working on something. Nobody says “these teachers have been teaching for a long time and you haven't so you're a teacher who really has a lot of work to do.” I feel everyone is working on something and while there are the experienced teachers where everyone's like “oh she’s got it down,” it's not in a way that's like now she doesn't need to work on anything. We still all have professional development goals. (D. Willis, personal interview, June 16, 2016)

This quote from Dana exemplifies the stance regarding everyone having something to improve upon regardless of experience. She seems to be more comfortable discussing her own growth because she knows that others will do the same. The general feeling Dana describes here showed up in many stories shared by this study’s participants. Some of these stories, such as Katie’s story below, exemplify how quickly first-year teachers became aware of this culture of growth at Explore’s Schools.

I remember when I interviewed here, there was a whiteboard up in the room and it had a bunch of different people and their goals. I remember thinking “oh my God, that's so embarrassing they would post their goals” and I asked (the principal and academic director) about it. They were like “oh yeah – this person's getting coached on this, this person’s getting coached on this, blah, blah, blah” and I was like “oh, this is normal.” That was really cool to be able to talk about people’s growth in a non-pressure, non-evaluative way. Just the openness and because it's so common to be getting help or to be getting better, that makes people ask for it more because nobody is thinking “oh gosh, I'm getting observed today and I'm going to be on the good list or the bad list.” Instead, we talk about developing ourselves all the time. (K. Johnson, personal interview, January 28, 2016)

The attitude toward receiving feedback and discussing one’s own development that Katie speaks of came up in numerous interviews. This study’s participants routinely described this attitude as something that supported them in experiencing the professional development opportunities in which they participated. In addition to causing first-year teachers to be more accepting of the idea of growth in the first place, this pervasive mindset at Explore also allowed these teachers to speak up when they were not getting
what they needed out of a professional development opportunity. Megan Hunter
described the following with regard to how the organization’s mindset toward growth
supported her ability to experience the professional development opportunities at
Explore:

I really like the overall atmosphere of everyone having something to improve on. No one’s perfect. I felt that since day one which was also very helpful because, as a first year teacher, there are a lot of things I don’t know and this is something that I was saying all the time, but I never felt scared to say it. I would even be sitting in a workshop or working or a coaching meeting and I never felt scared to say I don’t know.” (M. Hunter, personal interview, June 7, 2016)

Megan’s thoughts contribute to the body of data that demonstrates a connection between Explore’s growth stance and teachers feeling supported with regard to the professional development opportunities at Explore. Teachers consistently name this stance regarding professional growth, which seems to be intentionally fostered by Explore’s leadership, as supporting their experiences of the professional development opportunities at this set of urban charter schools. Teachers report feeling open to discussing their growth and unafraid of asking questions (K. Johnson, personal interview, January 28, 2016; M. Hunter, personal interview, June 7, 2016). Recent research in this area helps to explain this finding, as it demonstrates a connection between teacher learning, improvements in student achievement, and environments where a growth stance among teachers is intentionally cultivated (Silbey, 2016). This finding directly contributes information to my third and final research question by offering information on how a positive stance regarding professional growth may contribute to first-year teachers’ experiences of professional development.

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**Causes of the Growth Stance**

The first-year teachers in this study focused heavily on how Explore’s growth stance toward professional development supported their ability to experience the various professional development opportunities available to them. This leaves one to question what it is about Explore’s atmosphere that inspires many teachers to be vulnerable and adopt this growth stance. Explore’s aforementioned operating values seem to aid the leaders in setting the stage for this stance and also provide language for leaders as they cultivate this stance in their schools. Digging deeper into what the teachers are saying, however, helps us to understand what it is about Explore’s atmosphere that allows teachers to be vulnerable in this way.

First and foremost, the sense of every teacher at Explore having identified growth areas seems to put teachers at ease. For instance, Dana Willis shared, “I feel everyone is working on something and while there are the experienced teachers where everyone's like ‘oh she’s got it down,’ it's not in a way that's like now she doesn't need to work on anything. We still all have professional development goals” (D. Willis, personal interview, June 16, 2016). Dana makes a point here to say that all teachers, even those that are experienced, have professional development goals. This seemingly aids in preventing Dana from feeling as though she is being singled out for her growth areas. Instead, she names feeling comfortable discussing her growth because she knows that everyone is working on something.
Revisiting Megan’s quote from earlier in this section allows us to see how this sense of everyone working on something allows first-year teachers to feel more vulnerable.

I really like the overall atmosphere of everyone having something to improve on. No one’s perfect. I felt that since day one which was also very helpful because, as a first year teacher, there are a lot of things I don’t know and this is something that I was saying all the time, but I never felt scared to say it. I would even be sitting in a workshop or working or a coaching meeting and I never felt scared to say I don’t know.” (M. Hunter, personal interview, June 7, 2016)

In this quote, Megan reports being more willing to take a risk during her professional development opportunities simply because she knows that everyone in the school is working on improving something about their practice. This explanation aids us in understanding what it is about Explore that allows teachers to be vulnerable and take a growth stance. This study’s participants seem to feel comfortable discussing and working on their growth areas because everyone around them is having these discussions as well.

Many teachers emphasized that everyone having a growth goal, not just teachers, helped them to feel much more comfortable when discussing their growth. Tamika Greggory provided a powerful example of this while discussing a conversation she had with her principal.

When I met with Chris the first time about my teaching goal, he told me about his goal. He said that he was working with you on time management. That made me really feel like this was something we all do instead of something I was in trouble about.” (T. Greggory, personal interview, January 21, 2016)

Here, Tamika refers to a goal that I was actually coaching her principal on in my capacity of Chief Academic Officer. Her principal seemingly used his own goal to put Tamika at
ease and help to build the growth stance that exists in his school. Tamika speaks about how Chris sharing this goal prevented her from feeling like she was in trouble when discussing her own growth. This appears to demonstrate one facet of Explore that allows teachers to feel vulnerable and to adopt the growth stance many of them named as supporting their ability to experience professional development. Teachers report feeling more comfortable discussing their own growth because everyone in the school has a goal and is open about discussing their goals. I return to this point again in the next chapter to discuss the possible implications this may have on what professional development opportunities Explore chooses to implement in the future.

**Busy Lives**

Almost all of this study’s participants quickly and easily identified an aspect of their urban charter schools that inhibited them from experiencing professional development opportunities at their schools. The first-year teachers in this study nearly unanimously examined the different ways in which their busy schedules interfered with their ability to fully experience professional development opportunities. Teachers listed many different meetings, activities, and responsibilities that filled up their respective schedules. Ultimately, all of these different activities, including the professional development opportunities themselves, seemed to either serve as a mental distraction during professional development opportunities or directly interfere with participants’ abilities to attend professional development opportunities.
Jamie Chow provided an example of this trend while explaining how her busy schedule serves as a distraction when she participates in professional development opportunities:

I mean there's so much, you know, looking at homework, creating lesson plans, making sure you're prepared, contacting parents. And, you're thinking about all the things that happen throughout the school day, you know? Which child was upset and why? What do I need to do to fix this tomorrow? There are just so many things that need to go on that sometimes you're not really feeling like you're super engaged in a PD or that this PD is really going to help you with what needs to happen for tomorrow then I just feel like a lot of the times I’m sitting there and my mind is on something else. (J. Chow, personal interview, June 14, 2016)

Jamie’s quote shows us how the responsibilities of a first-year teacher at Explore can prevent a teacher from being mentally present during a professional development opportunity. This study’s participants named similar lists of distractions to what Jamie names here. This usually included a list of items that needed to be finished by the next day that prevented teachers from fully focusing on a professional development opportunity. Carolyn Bernstein stated, “I just want time to think about today and plan for tomorrow. Sometimes I really don't want to sit through this hour and a half session on something because I just can’t think about it right now” (C. Bernstein, personal interview, June 7, 2016). Dana Willis shared a similar sentiment about how she sometimes feels when she walks out of a professional development workshop: “I walk out of it like huh, I'm tired and I can't process this right now. I have 3 hours of work to do and I’m supposed to be going home by now” (D. Willis, personal interview, June 16, 2016).

These examples demonstrate how teachers’ busy schedules can possibly serve as mental distractions during professional development opportunities. Even though these teachers physically participated in professional development opportunities, they report
not learning what their leaders hoped they would because they were too focused on all of
the other responsibilities they have to fulfill. Sometimes, however, the distractions
seemed to be much more literal, as in the following story shared by Sarah Miller:

I think sometimes what happens with the PLC situation is, you're doing other
things while you're trying to sit there and focus on the PLC because you
legitimately don't have any other time to prep. Like, I have lunch duty on
Wednesdays, and I have two PLCs in the morning, so I have no prep time. I sit in
my PLC all the time kind of half doing other things to prepare for the classes I
have to teach. It makes it so I'm not really focusing on the PLC, but I don't really
know what else to do. (S. Miller, personal interview, June 14, 2016)

Sarah’s example shows us how teachers can seemingly be forced into situations where
they have to try to multi-task during a professional development opportunity because they
have no alternative. This multi-tasking may prevent teachers from learning what they
need to from the opportunities in which they participate.

In addition to describing these distractions that occur due to first-year teachers’
workloads and busy schedules, many participants offered examples of times in which
their busy schedules directly prevented them from participating in opportunities that were
offered. Laura Dawson offered this example of how her schedule prevented her from
participating in personal coaching:

We may want to have a coaching meeting and we're trying to set up a time, but it's
hard to figure out a time when all of our schedules are so full. We'll only have a
certain number of periods off and many of those are filled with PLC meetings, so
trying to actually schedule a coaching meeting becomes impossible. (L. Dawson,
personal interview, June 16, 2016)

Laura’s story adds an extra layer by exemplifying how one type of professional
development opportunity can actually prevent a teacher from participating in another
opportunity. This showed up as a theme among several of the participants, sometimes
even preventing teachers from participating in opportunities that they need in order to obtain information vital to their everyday teaching. Pamela Cox shared this example:

I have an LLI group and I'm also supposed to have a guided reading group. But when I had the LLI training, the guided reading training was happening at the same time. Then, everyone gets so busy and things get lost in the shuffle. So, I've been emailing trying to say, "Hey, I still don't know how to do guided reading and these kids are kind of just sitting there reading the entire time because I don't know what to do with them." Because everything is so tightly scheduled, it's hard to fit in another PD. So, my LLI kids are getting a ton of really great instruction, but my guided reading kids haven't had any because I still don't quite understand how to do my school’s version of guided reading. (P. Cox, personal interview, June 17, 2016)

In this example, Pamela’s busy schedule prevented her from receiving the proper training to teach guided reading. This example sits on the extreme end of the data collected, but many teachers described situations in which their schedules directly prevented them from participating in professional development opportunities. Cindy Young stated, “There's a lack of time. I’m supposed to observe another teacher for my growth plan, but a lot of our preps, a lot of our lunches even, are taken for meetings so I haven’t been able to do that” (C. Young, personal interview, January 19, 2016). First-year teachers consistently named a tension between the time that it takes to attend meetings and fulfill duties and the time needed to participate in some of Explore’s professional development opportunities. Teachers often face a choice of ignoring a responsibility to the school or neglecting their own development.

All of these stories speak to the same trend in the data: First-year teachers at Explore Schools reported being inhibited from experiencing the professional development opportunities due to their busy schedules and numerous responsibilities. Whether their responsibilities served as distractions or directly prevented teachers from
participating, nearly every participant named that their schedules inhibited them from fully experiencing the professional development opportunities offered at Explore. This finding adds information in service this study’s third research question by providing evidence for how Explore’s first-year teachers’ current responsibilities may be inhibiting them from fully participating in the professional development opportunities they are offered. I return to this finding in the next chapter to further analyze it and discuss its implications on the overall findings of this study.

Summary of Findings

The Explore Schools system of urban charter schools offers a wealth of professional development opportunities to its first-year teachers, as outlined in chapter four. Explore’s leaders may be operating on the assumption that first-year teachers benefit more from opportunities that build big-picture knowledge than from opportunities that pertain to strategies that can be immediately implemented. The participants in this study identified a variety of ways in which these opportunities influenced their teaching practice.

Chapter five outlined some of these ways, specifically focusing on how opportunities related to classroom management and lesson planning showed up in teachers’ practice. Chapter five also examined what teachers reported they are not learning through the professional development opportunities at Explore Schools, including a clear picture of what student behavior would look like, how to manage students with extreme behaviors, and how to handle difficult conversations with students’ families. The professional development opportunities this study’s participants tended to
focus on mostly fell into the immediately implementable categories, which could mean that first-year teachers favor this type of opportunity over opportunities that build big-picture knowledge.

Finally, chapter six provided information about the aspects of Explore Schools that support or inhibit how teachers experience professional development opportunities. This included how the range of opportunities and growth stance at Explore support how teachers experience opportunities and how teachers’ busy schedules inhibit them from experiencing professional development opportunities. Teachers named that the growth stance at Explore likely stems from the fact that everyone has a learning goal, which may be connected with less defensiveness and an openness to improve one’s teaching practice. Additionally, this chapter demonstrated how the number of professional development opportunities Explore offers its first-year teachers may both support and inhibit teachers’ experiences of these opportunities. I examine this notion more deeply in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

The proliferation of urban charter schools over the last fifteen years created a new educational environment that educators and educational researchers need to better understand and improve in an effort to better serve our teachers and students. This study seeks to add new knowledge about a specific portion of this environment. Specifically, this qualitative, practitioner inquiry aims to discover how specific professional development opportunities affect the practice of first-year teachers in an urban charter system that serves an underserved population in an effort to ascertain which kinds of professional development opportunities might benefit these first-year teachers as they adapt to their new profession and context.

As Explore’s Chief Academic Officer, I am ultimately responsible for setting and executing on our school system’s vision for all academic programming. Teacher professional development is crucial to this execution, as it is the avenue through which teachers learn about Explore’s curriculum, approach to instruction, and approach to classroom management. My goal as Explore’s academic leader includes supporting our first-year teachers in such a way that they grow as quickly as possible and feel successful so they will return to our system for a second year. One of the original reasons I embarked on this specific study was so the findings could support me in working toward these goals by providing me with information that I could use to inform our professional development offerings for our first-year teachers at Explore.

Before I conducted even one interview, this study led me to information in service of this goal. The research I studied while crafting this study’s conceptual framework
both helped me to refine the questions I wanted to investigate and provided me with new information about how first-year teachers tend to interact with professional development opportunities in urban settings. This previous research points to many important findings that help to inform the goals of this study. On a basic level, many studies seem to show that novice teachers across contexts may benefit from professional development experiences that are different from those developed for seasoned teachers (Burkman, 2012; Chong, 2011; Kunzman, 2003). For instance, inexperienced teachers may benefit from focusing on professional development opportunities involving classroom management or classroom procedures before spending too much time on content knowledge (Balli, 2011). Additionally, teachers in urban contexts seem to benefit from professional development opportunities that are tailored specifically for the challenges of this context (Gaikhorst et al., 2014; Matsko & Hammerness, 2013). This study’s findings go deeper than this previous research by examining the ways in which teachers report various professional development opportunities as showing up in their practice.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, this study’s participants eagerly shared stories about their triumphs and failures as they provided the context for how their experiences of professional development showed up in their daily practice. These stories add texture to the research that previously existed regarding first-year teachers in urban charter schools. While the data in the previous chapters alone serves to provide valuable information that did not previously exist, I will use this chapter to dig deeper into this study’s major analytical findings and make an argument for how Explore and other schools could use these findings.
In this chapter, I return to this study’s analytical findings. I use these findings to craft an argument for potential changes Explore, and possibly schools in similar contexts, could make. Following this analysis, I examine the implications this study may have for Explore Schools as well as the field of education in general and urban education specifically. While examining these implications, I also address the how they can serve to inform future research. Finally, I offer some final thoughts to conclude this dissertation study.

**More is not Better**

The findings examined in the previous chapter show us that, while teachers may appreciate the range of opportunities that Explore offers, these opportunities seem to contribute to a feeling of being too busy to truly absorb what is intended during each opportunity. Multiple teachers described a feeling of being mentally “checked out” during some of their professional development opportunities and even told stories of one opportunity directly conflicting with another (M. Hunter, personal interview, January 21, 2016; D. Willis, personal interview, June 16, 2016). This finding seemingly provides a rebuttal against Explore’s “more is better” approach to professional development. It shows us that packing too much into a first-year teacher’s schedule may actually slow a teacher’s development by making professional development opportunities less impactful.

Based on these findings, I argue that Explore should make an effort to reduce the number of activities on first-year teachers’ schedules, including the number of professional development opportunities in which they are expected to participate. I believe that teachers may actually learn more from their professional development
opportunities if they are not feeling overwhelmed and being forced into situations in
which they are multi-tasking during professional development sessions. Without the data
from this study, this argument may seem counterintuitive. One rarely hears an argument
for providing less professional development so teachers can learn more. In this case,
however, the findings seem to point to more not being better. This type of change to
Explore’s approach to professional development for first year teachers would seem to be
supported by research as well. Specifically, numerous studies speak to inexperienced
teachers possibly benefiting from a different approach to professional development than
experienced teachers (Burkman, 2012; Chong, 2011; Kunzman, 2003). The argument I
make here focuses solely on first-year teachers. As I will explain later in this chapter,
this modification could go away as a teacher gains more experience.

**What to Eliminate**

The argument I make above leaves one blaring question unanswered: How would
we decide what to cut in order to make Explore’s first-year teachers’ schedules more
manageable? The answer to this type of question does not come easily, as the
responsibilities and professional development opportunities that Explore’s teachers
currently experience are not random. Explore’s leaders seemingly put a lot of thought
into the list of responsibilities and professional development opportunities for which
teachers are responsible. I believe, however, that a potential answer to this question lies
within the analytical findings of this dissertation study. In the following sections, I return
to these findings to create an argument for how Explore Schools could reshape the set of
activities in which first-year teachers are expected to participate in an effort to promote mental engagement with their professional development opportunities.

**Teacher Development Plans**

The first argument I make actually focuses on what Explore’s leaders should avoid eliminating. Specifically, I believe that Explore should leave teacher development plans and teacher coaching intact as they are currently implemented. This stems from this study’s findings related to what teachers believe to support their experiences of professional development. Teachers overwhelmingly named the growth stance that exists at Explore Schools as the facet of this school system that supports their experiences of professional development more than anything else. This stance seemed to be connected with teachers feeling comfortable working on their areas of growth instead of feeling judged for not being perfect (D. Willis, personal interview, June 16, 2016). I analyzed this trend more deeply in chapter six, finding that teachers tied this growth stance to the fact that everyone in the system has a growth goal and is open to discussing their goals (M. Hunter, personal interview, June 7, 2016; K. Johnson, personal interview, January 28, 2016). It stands to reason that removing these growth goals from Explore’s system in any way could potentially lead to a degradation of this growth stance, therefore inhibiting teachers’ experiences of professional development. This is why I argue that teacher development plans must stay intact above all other forms of professional development at Explore.
Immediately Implementable Strategies

Based on the findings presented in chapter six, I argue that Explore should slightly reduce the number of professional development opportunities it offers first-year teachers. This could potentially allow teachers to improve their focus during the remaining opportunities and possibly gain more usable information and skills. Returning to the findings from chapters four and five provides us with information that we can use to make suggestions regarding which opportunities Explore could cut in order to allow this to happen. In chapter four, I introduced four categories into which all of Explore’s professional development opportunities can be grouped. These included two categories that focused building educational knowledge, “pedagogical and content knowledge building” and “product creation,” and two categories that focused on strategies that could be implemented the next day, “quickly-learned strategies” and “responsive to teacher needs.” By analyzing the categories in this way, I found that Explore offers far more professional development that falls into the two knowledge building categories than it does for the two immediately implemented categories. This could lead one to the assumption that Explore’s leaders believe first-year teachers need more professional development focused on big-picture knowledge building than quickly implemented strategies.

Analyzing how teachers described their professional development opportunities in chapter five led to the finding that first-year teachers seemed to gain more from opportunities that fell into the immediately implemented categories than they did from opportunities related to educational knowledge building. This misalignment between
what leaders offer and what first-year teachers seem to find most valuable could be corrected while also addressing the problem of teachers’ schedules inhibiting their abilities to experience professional development. In other words, I argue that Explore should slightly reduce its professional development offerings that fall into the two educational knowledge building categories while maintaining opportunities that fall into the immediate implementation categories. This could allow teachers to focus more on the content of the opportunities they participate in, which may lead to teachers learning more from these opportunities.

This choice would be supported by information about what teachers named as the most valuable opportunities they participated in as well as what they believe is missing from Explore’s current set of offerings. In both of these cases, this study’s participants focused primarily on opportunities that fall into the immediately implementable categories. Additionally, teachers went so far as to overtly name that they found professional development opportunities difficult to focus on when the content did not immediately help them, as seen in the following example.

> There are just so many things that need to go on that sometimes you're not really feeling like you're super engaged in a PD or that this PD is really going to help you with what needs to happen for tomorrow then I just feel like a lot of the times I’m sitting there and my mind is on something else. (J. Chow, personal interview, June 14, 2016)

Jamie’s quote provides further evidence for the argument that teachers could possibly benefit more from professional development opportunities that focus on strategies that can be immediately implemented because teachers may be more engaged with the content
of such an opportunity. This helps us to have a general direction when seeking to use this study’s findings to inform Explore’s professional development offerings.

It is important to note that the argument I am making does not entail a dramatic reduction of all opportunities related to building a first-year teacher’s educational knowledge. Explore’s school leaders must embrace the tension that exists between what they believe first-year teachers will benefit from learning and what these teachers are reporting as useful to their practice. One approach Explore’s leaders could take would be to strategically organize the knowledge, concepts, and strategies that they want first-year teachers to learn along a timeline. The suggestion I am making entails pushing a small number of educational knowledge building opportunities further down this timeline than where these opportunities currently sit. To a first-year teacher, this will feel like a reduction in what they are being asked to do because some opportunities will be pushed into their second year of teaching. To a leader, however, it simply means altering the timeline in a way that promotes first-year teachers’ abilities to engage in Explore’s professional development offerings. The following section will provide more specificity to this argument.

**Lesson Planning**

My current argument that Explore should slightly reduce the number of opportunities it offers to first-year teachers in the big-picture knowledge building categories could benefit from more direction. Additionally, teachers named more than just professional development opportunities when describing all of the various activities on their schedules that potentially prevented them from getting as much as they could out
of their professional development opportunities. Teachers also named feeling generally overwhelmed by tasks such as lesson planning, grading papers, calling parents, and duties such as lunch duty and breakfast duty (A. Eggers, personal interview, June 7, 2016; P. Cox, personal interview, June 17, 2016; L. Dawson, personal interview, June 16, 2016). I believe that it is possible to both reduce the impact that these various activities have on teachers while also providing more specificity to my argument about what Explore should cut from their professional development offerings.

I argue that Explore’s leaders could alter their approach to lesson planning for first-year teachers in order to both cut professional development opportunities and cut responsibilities from teachers at the same time. Specifically, Explore’s leaders could provide pre-made lesson plans to first-year teachers in some subjects and support teachers with altering these lesson plans for daily instruction instead of asking first-year teachers to create lesson plans from scratch on their own time. This would allow Explore to reduce the professional development opportunities related to lesson planning, which fall in the “product creation” category, because less time would most likely be needed to learn how to alter lesson plans than it currently takes to learn how to create lesson plans from scratch. This is consistent with my previous argument that Explore should be reducing or postponing opportunities from the knowledge building categories. More nuanced lesson planning professional development opportunities could be offered in a teacher’s second year, when teachers would be more likely to be able to engage with this type of development.
This move could save Explore’s first-year teachers countless hours of planning, which could lighten their overall load and possibly allow these teachers to feel less distracted during their professional development opportunities. This approach seems to be supported by research as well. Balli (2011) demonstrated that inexperienced teachers may be able to retain information related to professional development opportunities involving classroom management or classroom procedures more than they can for opportunities related to content knowledge. Shifting professional development away from lesson planning and instead focusing more energy on strategies that can be immediately implemented seems to be aligned to this research.

It is important to note that this study’s participants found the professional development opportunities related to lesson planning to be among the more valuable academic opportunities they experienced (P. Cox, personal interview, June 17, 2016; C. Bernstein, personal interview, June 7, 2016; A. Eggers, personal interview, June 7, 2016). In fact, this is one of the few academic-related opportunities that came up consistently when teachers described how various opportunities influenced their practice (M. Hunter, personal interview, January 22, 2016). As described in chapter five, however, this was partially because teachers left this opportunity with a finished product that they could actually use in the near future. By providing teachers with the opportunity to alter pre-made lesson plans, teachers would still receive this benefit while not losing hours from their schedules at the same time.

The argument I make here is certainly not that teachers should never learn to plan lessons on their own. Consistent with what I stated in earlier sections, I would argue that
some professional development opportunities pertaining to educational knowledge building, possibly including lesson planning, could be pushed into teachers’ second or third year of teaching. This could allow teachers to focus on opportunities that fall into the immediately implementable categories, while reducing teachers’ workload during the critical first year when there is so much to learn. This shift would bring more alignment between what school leaders seem to want first-year teachers to learn and what teachers report they are able to focus on during their first year of teaching.

Implications

I embarked on this qualitative research study with the goal of adding depth and texture to existing theories about how first year teachers experience professional development opportunities. As the academic leader of a school system, I knew that I would find it helpful to be able to go beyond the studies that tie specific types of professional development to lower teacher attrition rates and student academic achievement. While this information may be helpful, there is more nuance to understanding which facets of specific professional development opportunities are helpful to teachers than what can be gleaned from simply examining these numbers. By readings the stories and anecdotes collected during the course of this study that are included in the previous chapters, one can begin to answer questions that go beyond identifying which type of professional development opportunity may be connected with improvements in student achievement. In this section, I will summarize what I believe to be the most important implications of this study with regard to Explore Schools, educational theory development, and future research.
Explore Schools

In discussing the implications of this study for Explore Schools, it is important to note that these particular implications are inextricably linked to my role as Explore’s Chief Academic Officer. In this role, I am responsible for creating and executing on Explore’s academic vision. This includes all teacher professional development for the school system, which means when I discuss how this study could potentially affect the school system, I am essentially discussing shifts that I would need to personally catalyze at Explore Schools.

The first of these shifts involves how Explore prepares first-year teachers before each school year begins. While there is currently a heavy emphasis on introducing teachers to classroom management techniques, this study’s findings demonstrate that this was still inadequate. In addition to providing numerous stories about behavioral situations they were unprepared for, many teachers named feeling as though Explore’s leadership did not prepare them with an accurate picture of what student behavior would look like in their classrooms. This left teachers feeling unprepared and some teachers even openly wondered if this oversight was intentional.

The implications of this finding are both simple and complicated at the same time. The simple part is identifying that Explore needs to improve. The school system’s leaders need to find a way to better prepare first-year teachers for the behavioral challenges that exist in this urban charter setting. The fix itself, however, is complicated. Explore’s leaders need to figure out how to effectively provide first-year teachers with a clear picture of what student behavior in the school system will entail before the students
are actually in session. This may prove to be difficult, as simply providing written or orally delivered scenarios has not worked so far. The fix will most likely include a mix of video and live demonstration lessons. The use of video may not be entirely effective, however, as it is not easy to capture extreme behaviors on video because students tend to behave differently when they know they are being recorded. We have yet to find the correct answer, but the data from this study clearly shows that this is something the Explore Schools leadership needs to work to resolve. We will take this data into account as we plan next year’s pre-service as well as any additional new-teacher induction activities that arise as a reaction to this research.

Another implication of this study’s findings for Explore Schools involves something that was missing from this study’s data. The absence of professional development opportunities specifically targeting culturally responsive teaching techniques leaves something to be desired in Explore’s current professional development offerings. Recent research demonstrates the importance of professional development in this area, especially for inexperienced teachers in urban settings (Ford & Quinn, 2010; Garcia & Chun, 2016; Griner & Stewart, 2012; Etta R Hollins, 2006). In seeking to improve Explore’s ability to prepare first-year teachers for the classroom management challenges they may have, it would make sense to look closely at this research and weave this type of professional development into a set of improved offerings for Explore’s first-year teachers. If done well, implementing professional development on culturally responsive teaching techniques could equip teachers with techniques that they could use to prevent challenging behavioral situations before they begin.
Explore’s leaders must be careful as they seek to improve their professional development offerings. This study’s findings demonstrate that first-year teachers at Explore already feel overwhelmed by the amount that is asked of them on a daily basis. The number of professional development opportunities Explore’s first-year teachers are asked to participate in clearly contributes to this feeling, which means it would be a misstep to simply increase the number of offerings. As I argued in the previous section, I believe that Explore should reduce the number of opportunities it offers first-year teachers in the educational knowledge building categories, including lesson planning. These opportunities could instead occur in teachers’ second and third years, which could allow teachers to focus more on the opportunities that offer information that can be immediately implemented.

Additionally, Explore’s leaders should initiate an audit of the amount of time they are currently asking teachers to spend participating in various activities such as duties and meetings. Based on the findings from this audit, there may be a need to actually reduce the amount that is asked of Explore’s first-year teachers in an effort to reduce the impact that these activities have on teachers’ schedules. Based on the findings of this study, this may actually increase the effectiveness of the opportunities that teachers participate in because teachers will no longer need to multi-task during the opportunities they attend. This study’s conceptual framework is based on the premise that first-year teachers may benefit from professional development opportunities that are tailored to their level of experience as well as their context. In addition to tailored content, these teachers may benefit from an amount of professional development that is appropriate for their level of
experience, further supporting the idea that Explore may need to examine the possibility of reducing its professional development offerings as well as other activities that take teachers’ time.

**Theory Development and Future Research**

In developing this study, I originally intended to add texture to previous research by going beyond a quantitative analysis and seeking to understand how the information gained during professional development opportunities was reported to influence first-year teachers’ classrooms in the urban charter context. Previous research demonstrates that first-year teachers may benefit from professional development opportunities related to classroom management (Balli, 2011; Chan & Yung, 2015). This seems to be especially true in urban settings, where school systems across our country routinely experiment with intense methods of professional development in an attempt to improve support for the teachers in this context (Gaikhorst et al., 2014; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Lambeth & Lashley, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This study offers new texture and depth to these bodies of literature by providing specific examples of how first-year teachers report various professional development opportunities as influencing their practice in the urban charter context. The stories and examples teachers shared when describing how professional development influenced their teaching practice offer new insight into how teachers interact with the professional development opportunities in which they participate.

In addition to adding this texture, the themes gathered from this study’s data add new information to the bodies of literature I examined in the first few chapters. One such
addition relates to pre-service preparation for teachers in the urban charter context. Schools around the country, including thousands of charter schools, are moving to schedules in which teachers are provided with anywhere between one week to six weeks of training prior to the school year. Currently, no defined body of research focuses on the best use of this time. This study provides information that these schools can use in order to inform the planning of this time with first-year teachers. Specifically, schools can use the findings of this study to build pre-service schedules that include ample opportunities related to the development of classroom management skills as well as a clear picture of the types of behavior that first-year teachers should expect to see in their classrooms. By improving professional development and focusing on what first-year teachers may benefit from the most, schools that incorporate this pre-service period of time could possibly see increases in student learning (Guskey & Sparks, 2004; Rutz et al., 2012).

This study’s findings also have implications specific to charter schools and other schools that offer a variety of professional development opportunities. The participants of this study frequently named their experience of professional development opportunities being inhibited by the amount of activities on their schedules. Previous studies found that tailoring professional development for first-year teachers as well as teachers in the urban context may be connected with positive outcomes (Chan & Yung, 2015; Kunzman, 2003; Matsko & Hammerness, 2013). The fact that Explore’s first-year teachers named being too overwhelmed by the number of opportunities being offered to be able to effectively experience these opportunities leads one to believe that there is a threshold with regard to the amount of time utilized for professional development that
schools should adhere to. Explore’s attempt to tailor its professional development potentially led to the system offering too many opportunities, which may have led to the teachers in this study naming that their busy schedules interfered with their abilities to gain new information from professional development opportunities.

In addition to possibly offering too much, Explore may also be failing to focus its efforts on professional development opportunities that teachers would find to be the most impactful. Specifically, this study found that teachers named the benefits of professional development opportunities related to immediately implementable strategies much more often than they named the benefits of opportunities related to big-picture knowledge building. This could possibly mean that first-year teachers benefit more from opportunities that offer strategies that can be immediately implemented.

These findings have implications for future research as well. Future research could potentially dig further into this distinction between the types of opportunities first-year teachers may benefit from and opportunities that could wait until later in the teachers’ career. Additionally, research into first-year teachers’ schedules on the whole and how their workload affects their overall development could be helpful to school leaders as well.

Limitations

This study investigated the ways in which various professional development opportunities were reported to show up in the practice of first-year teachers in the urban charter context. I stand by the data collected during this study as well as the related findings and conclusions, but it is important to acknowledge that this study had
limitations that could potentially affect the scope and conclusions of this dissertation study.

The first of these limitations involves the participants and timing of this study. This study focused on a relatively small group of first-year teachers in a single school system during a single academic year. School systems, especially charter school systems, are dynamic in ways that make every year very different from the previous year. I have no doubt that the data would look at least slightly different if this study was repeated during another academic year, let alone in another school system. I still believe that the conclusions and lessons discussed here are transferrable, but it is important to consider how these lessons should be tailored if being applied to a different set of teachers in a different school system.

Another potential limitation involves the effect of one of this study’s findings on another. Specifically, while investigating how professional development opportunities show up in the practice of first-year teachers, I found that the wealth of opportunities Explore offered may have adversely affected how teachers were experiencing the opportunities in which they participated. While this finding is important by itself, I believe it is important to note the effects this finding could potentially have on how teachers report professional development opportunities as influencing their practice. If teachers were truly overwhelmed, they may not have experienced professional development in the same way that they would have if their schedules allowed them more time to fully experience the opportunities they were offered.
Finally, it is important to examine the ways in which my positionality could have impacted this study’s findings. As the chief academic officer, I am ultimately responsible for Explore’s professional development structures and all of the teachers who participated in this study are aware of this. While I attempted to mitigate any effect my positionality had on this study, it is impossible to truly know if teachers were fully comfortable providing transparent information during their interviews.

Concluding Thoughts

Urban school systems across the United States consistently struggle to hire and retain experienced, knowledgeable teachers. Because of this, these systems routinely hire large numbers of first-year teachers and put these inexperienced teachers in front of our country’s neediest students. The information included in this dissertation only scratches the surface of the amount of work that needs to be done in order to build systems to accelerate the growth of first-year teachers in urban environments and ensure that they stay in urban education over the course of their careers.

In addition to more research in this area, we as practitioners need to act on the research that already exists. The experience of reading thousands of pages of research regarding first-year teachers’ development in the urban charter context during the creation of this dissertation study was both enlightening and disheartening. It was enlightening to learn about the various approaches and programs that have been connected to increases in student academic results as well as teacher retention in these environments. A great deal of research already exists and we continue to build upon this body of knowledge every day. It is disheartening, however, to see how rarely we as
practitioners seem to act on this research. Research demonstrates that first-year teacher residency programs can have a profound impact on teachers in urban public and public charter schools, yet only a few of these programs exist. Research also demonstrates that teacher mentoring programs may be connected with noticeable increases in student achievement and decreases in teacher turnover for first-year teachers in urban environments, yet most urban schools do not have these programs. The divide between theory and practice causes one to question how we can break down the wall between what is known and what is practiced.

In this particular case, I commit to using the results from this study to improve the professional development offerings and first-year teacher training in the Explore Schools system of charter schools. I will use both the knowledge gained through my research as well as the findings of this study to improve and focus the opportunities we offer related to classroom management and will also seek to ensure first-year teachers can properly experience all of the opportunities we offer in the network. In addition to this, however, I sincerely hope that the findings of this study affect more than just Explore Schools. In order to improve urban education across the country, we need to learn from each other as well as the research that currently exists. I look forward to sharing this research with others as well as continuing to conduct practitioner research in an effort to consistently improve upon what we are doing in my school system.
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. Describe your teaching experience, including any student teaching or volunteering, before this year started.
2. Which professional development opportunities from this year’s pre-service do you think had the greatest positive impact on your instruction? Can you give an example and explain?
3. What evidence did you see of this positive impact?
4. Which sessions should we definitely repeat next year?
5. Which professional development opportunities from last year’s pre-service do you think had the least positive impact on your instruction? Which should we not offer? Which might we improve upon and how?
6. In what specific academic areas do you think most first-year teachers need more professional development before the next school year begins? Why? Can you give an example from your own experience?
7. In what specific school-culture areas do you think most first-year teachers need more professional development before the next school year begins? Why? Can you give an example from your own experience?
8. Which professional development opportunities from during the school year do you think have had the greatest positive impact on your instruction? Why? Can you give an example from your own experience?
9. Which professional development opportunities from during the school year do you think have had the least positive impact on your instruction? Why? Can you give an example from your own experience?
10. What professional development opportunities would like to see offered to first-year teachers that Explore Schools is not currently offering? Can you be as specific as possible?
11. What else would it help to know about your experience as a first-year teacher? About your perspective on these issues?
Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol

1. What are your co-teacher’s strengths as a teacher? Please be as specific as possible.
2. What are your co-teacher’s areas in greatest need of growth? Please be as specific as possible.
3. What professional development sessions from this year’s pre-service do you think had the greatest positive impact on your co-teacher’s instruction? What sessions do you think had the least positive impact on your co-teacher’s instruction?
4. In what academic areas would you like to see your co-teacher receive more professional development during next year’s pre-service? In what classroom-culture areas would you like to see your co-teacher receive more professional development during next year’s pre-service?
5. What professional development opportunities during the school year do you think have had the greatest positive impact on your co-teacher’s instruction? What opportunities do you think have had the least impact on your co-teacher’s instruction?
6. In what academic areas would you like to see your co-teacher receive more professional development during the school year? In what classroom-culture areas would you like to see your co-teacher receive more professional development during the school year?
Appendix C: Second Interview Protocol

1. Which professional development opportunities from the last 5 months do you think have had the greatest positive impact on your instruction? Why? Can you give 2 examples of how this impacted your teaching? (Both classroom management and academic examples are helpful.)

2. Which professional development opportunities from the last 5 months do you think have had the least positive impact on your instruction? Why? Can you give 2 examples from your own experience?

3. In what specific academic areas do you think most first-year teachers need more professional development before the next school year begins? Why? Can you give an example from your own experience?

4. In what specific school-culture areas do you think most first-year teachers need more professional development before the next school year begins? Why? Can you give an example from your own experience?

5. What professional development opportunities would you like to see offered to first-year teachers that Explore Schools is not currently offering? Why these? Can you be as specific as possible?

6. What else would it be helpful for me to know for this study about how professional development opportunities show up in the practice of first-year teachers?

*Additional questions were added for individual participants based on their previous interviews and information acquired during the focus group.
Appendix D: Code List

Accepting: This category includes descriptions of a school-environment that is a comfortable place to ask questions and make mistakes.

Coach: This category includes one-on-one coaching that a teacher may receive from a leader or peer.

Collaboration: This category includes professional development opportunities that are designed to be collaborative for teachers and their peers.

Construct: This category includes professional development opportunities that teachers report as being ineffective due to the opportunity’s design.

Consultant: This category includes professional development opportunities delivered by consultants from outside of the organization.

Co-teaching: This category includes professional development opportunities designed to provide teachers with techniques regarding how to interact with a co-teacher and maximize student learning by utilizing the co-teaching model.

Data: This category includes professional development opportunities designed to increase teachers’ abilities to analyze student data and plan instruction according to the findings.

DEAR: This category includes activities designed to improve a teacher’s ability to effectively implement independent reading in his/her classroom.

Differentiation: This category includes professional development opportunities designed to provide teachers with techniques that can be used to differentiate academic lessons for different styles of learners.

Difficult: This category includes professional development opportunities designed to provide teachers with classroom management techniques specifically for students with extreme behaviors.

Emotions: This category includes professional development opportunities designed to provide teachers with strategies to control their emotional state during difficult moments of the school-day.

Expect: This category includes professional development opportunities designed to provide teachers with clarity regarding what above-level, on-level, and below-level student work looks like on a given grade-level.
Families: This category includes professional development opportunities that are designed to provide teachers with techniques and suggestions regarding how to interact with students’ families.

GR: This category includes professional development opportunities designed to improve a teacher’s guided reading content and pedagogical knowledge.

Growth: This category includes descriptions of a growth mindset, in which teachers are able to openly discuss their areas of growth and how they are approaching these areas.

Intervention: This category includes professional development opportunities designed to provide teachers with content and/or pedagogical knowledge regarding academic intervention programs.

LP: This category includes any activity during which teachers learn how to plan and then actually plan lessons that they will implement with their students. (Includes all academic subjects)

Management: This category includes activities that lead to an increased knowledge of preventative and reactionary discipline techniques, including school-specific systems.

Math: This category includes any activity designed to improve a teacher’s math content and pedagogical knowledge.

Obs: This category includes professional development opportunities that involve a teacher being observed teaching a lesson and receiving feedback based on that observation.

Practice: This category includes activities in which teachers practice or perform portions of lessons for others in an attempt to get feedback and improve their craft.

Procedures: This category includes activities during which teachers learn to design and then actually design routines and procedures that students will follow in their classrooms.

Reality: This category includes professional development opportunities designed to provide a realistic picture of what student behavior is generally like in a classroom or school.

Unit Planning: This category includes activities during which teachers design and create academic units that are taught during the school-year. (Includes all academic subjects)
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