# I Want to Learn, Grow, and Get Better Too: A Best Practices Framework for Professional Development for Classified and Business and Operations Staff in an Urban K-12 Setting

by

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ABSTRACT

This research examined, through a qualitative grounded theory approach, perceptions of classified, non-instructional staff, and leaders in business and operations on a best practices professional development framework for operational staff. The study also examined the responsibility of leaders to provide professional development opportunities to their staff and touched on how it affects the workplace culture. In the past, studies have examined the benefits of continuous job-embedded training and professional development opportunities for teachers, the administrators' responsibility to provide such opportunities, and the effect professional development has on school culture; but there is limited research about providing consistent professional development opportunities for classified and non-instructional staff. Classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations have both a direct and indirect impact on student learning and achievement. Providing continuous professional development opportunities to this population, to mirror that of teachers, may help increase the knowledge and skill capacity in a school district. This study was conducted using a survey for classified and non-instructional staff, a semi-structured focus group interview of leaders in business and operations, and document reviews from the same leaders. Results from this research supported the existing literature summarized in Chapter Two about professional development for teachers and the theoretical framework that guided the study. The researcher highly recommends that K-12 districts adopt this best practices framework for the continuous development of non-teaching staff.

*Keywords:* Classified staff; Professional development; Best Practices Framework; Business and operations leaders; Adult learning

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Finally, I must thank the classified staff, non-instructional staff, and operational leaders for participating in this study. Your honest responses helped to add this topic to the literature and brought this best practices professional development framework for operational staff to life!

# DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to classified and non-instructional staff in education. Thank you for your contribution to student achievement. It is my profound hope that, like teachers, you also have continual opportunities to participate in training and professional development.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my late family members: my dad Nate, aunts JoAnne and Jackie, uncle Andre, and brothers Orlando and Jasaun whose memories I will always cherish.

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# CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

## Background of the Study

In education, teachers are the central focus of professional development and professional learning communities (Antinluoma et al., 2018). However, teachers are not the only people who help create an environment for students to thrive (Adejar, 2020; Admiraal, 2021; Turner, 2002). Classified staff on the business and operations side of a school district also help create conditions for students to flourish (Turner, 2002). For example, safety and security staff help create a safe learning environment, transportation staff remove barriers for students to get to school, and secretaries make connections with staff, students, parents, and the community. Non-teaching staff are as important as teachers, principals, and other academic leaders (Loeb, 2016; Turner, 2002; Vishwaroop, 2022). As Loeb (2016) argued, "Adults are the greatest resource for students" (p. 4), which is not exclusive to teachers.

A two-fold precept holds that all staff have the right to opportunities for growth, knowledge, and development (Admiraal et al., 2021; Turner, 2002), and the responsibility to provide those opportunities falls on department, school, or district leaders. The success of this guiding principle is contingent on leadership support (Admiraal et al., 2021; Swanson et al., 2020). Training and professional development enhance the skills necessary for quality job performance. Providing professional development is a way to support the growth and development of classified staff. Weiss Bros. (n.d.) determined that the benefits of professional development included (1) improved job skills, (2) improved safety, (3) enhanced morale and higher retention rates, (4) increased engagement, and (5) increased efficiency and productivity.

Professional development is the continuum of growth, improvement, and life-long learning (Beavers, 2009; Hien, 2008; Mlakar, 2019).

McChesney and Aldridge (2019), broadly defined professional development as providing activities aimed to develop the knowledge and skills of professionals in their areas of expertise. These authors determined that it was important to provide professional development to the entire educational workforce. McChesney and Aldridge limited their professional development research to teachers; however, the target audience for the proposed study is classified (non-certificated) and non-instructional staff in K-12 settings. This population can also benefit from developing their knowledge and skills in their areas of expertise.

**Classified Staff and Student Achievement**

Non-teaching staff who work in school systems but not directly with students are an integral part of student and district success (Vishwaroop, 2022). Feuerborn et al. (2018) defined classified staff as "those employed in schools . . . but whose position does not require the certification of a teacher or other certified school personnel" (p. 103). Turner (2002) conducted a study on strategies for performance improvement for classified personnel in K-12 schools and argued their effect on "student learning, teacher preparation and presentation, parent and community support, and administrative decision-making opportunities" (p. 1). Connolly and James (1998) considered support staff an "essential element of the teaching team" (p. 277).

Teachers and principals are not the only adults who work in schools and support students (Loeb, 2016; Vishwaroop, 2022). Academic staff such as secretaries, instructional aides, instructional coordinators, curriculum specialists, librarians, and counselors also support student achievement (Loeb, 2016; Turner, 2002). Consider the role of safety and security, buildings and grounds, food service, custodial services, and transportation professionals. Each specialized team

plays a part in meeting Maslow's hierarchy of needs in an educational setting. Ensuring students are safe, fed, and transported to a clean and comfortable environment impacts learning and belonging (Turner, 2002). According to Vishwaroop (2022), non-teaching staff's "contribution might seem invisible at first, but it is actually very evident their contributions are the reason for the smooth functioning of the school system" (p. 5).

**Lack of Professional Development for Classified Staff**

According to Holmes' (2020) study on higher education, continuous professional development should be provided to the entire workforce. Although higher education entities have adopted business systems, financial structures, and leadership models, they have not made professional development activities a priority for all staff. School districts have set aside professional development days for teachers and other certificated staff (Antinluoma et al., 2018; Ohio Revised Code, Section 3319.074, 2019; Zhukova, 2018); however, they have not made continuous professional development a priority for classified staff on the business and operation side of education.

Mlakar (2019) also made a connection between professional development and the improvement of school climate: "Professional development programming improved weak areas that affect the overall climate of a school or district" (p. 30). Yet little is known about the role of classified staff in this process. For example, security professionals are classified staff who have an impact on the school climate and student achievement (Turner, 2002). However, Forber-Pratt et al. (2021) stated, "school security professionals (SSPs) have increased presence in schools, yet little is known about how they view the importance of their relationships with students and the broader school climate" (p. 344).

Additionally, there are studies on leadership development (Stewart, 2017; Westfahl & Wilkins, 2017), but few studies exist on the role of leadership in providing professional development opportunities to the entire district. Antinluoma et al. (2018) named school culture and leadership (e.g., the principal or building leader) as the top two critical characteristics of a school and stated that the role of the leader was key in supporting the workplace climate and providing professional learning activities. The authors further discussed schools as professional learning communities where the workforce supports a shared vision and where they practice ways to find better approaches to new learning. Researchers (e.g., Orta, 2015) have discussed the hierarchy or power dynamic of leadership and building leaders in providing professional development for teachers, but there is a gap in the literature regarding who is responsible for providing professional learning opportunities to classified staff in the K-12 setting. According to Orta (2015), leaders have a directing role and are responsible for connecting the workforce to organizational goals. Future-oriented competencies meet essential needs and advance careers (Billings et al., 2019). Yet, providing professional development is not a current goal for classified staff. Where power is contested, leaders may also be insecure about staff's increasing in knowledge capacity (Coventry et al., 2015; Orta, 2015). Leaders must make an investment in providing learning opportunities for staff (Swanson et al., 2020; Westfahl et al., 2017).

## Statement of the Problem

The problem this proposed classical grounded theory addressed is that a professional development framework for business and operations staff does not exist. Research suggests that teachers and paraprofessional staff benefit from job-embedded training and professional development opportunities (Admiraal et al., 2021; Turner, 2002). In addition, researchers discuss professional development and workplace culture from a teacher or classroom perspective and

from a behavior and discipline perspective (Adejare et al., 2020; Feuerborn et al., 2018). However, classified staff have been largely excluded from the research regarding professional development in a K-12 setting. There are significant gaps in the research regarding the professional development of non-certificated staff on the business and operation side of a school district outside of job-embedded and evaluative training. Additional research should ask how classified and non-instructional staff experience personal and professional growth to meet the ever-changing needs of the district.

## Purpose and Significance of Study

Classified and non-instructional staff plays a significant role in the K-12 setting (Antiado et al., 2020; Feuerborn et al., 2018; Turner, 2002; Weiss Bros., n.d.). The purpose of the proposed classical grounded theory study was to develop a best practice professional development framework for business and operational staff in a large, urban school district. The researcher analyzed data collected from survey results from classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations and the results from a focus group interview with six business and operations leaders. The research questions (RQ) that guided the study were:

Overall RQ: What were the best practices for providing professional development for business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district?

RQ 1: How do the business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district describe their professional development needs and experiences?

RQ2: How do the business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district describe how professional development impact their personal and professional growth?

RQ3: How do business and operations leaders in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district describe their best practices in providing professional development to business and operations staff?

a. What are the perceived benefits of implementing an ongoing professional development framework for business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district?
b. What are the perceived barriers or challenges in implementing an ongoing professional development framework for business and operations staff in a large, urban, Midwestern K-12 school district?
c. In what ways does providing an ongoing professional development framework for business and operations staff in a large, urban, Midwestern K-12 school district affect the organizational culture?

The significance of this study was that it added to the body of knowledge, filled gaps related to professional development for classified staff, and made recommendations on what will engage this group of employees and help them enhance the mission and vision of the district and student achievement. It is vital that leaders create a culture of learning and development in business and operations to mirror academics in modeling growth and learning in the district for students and the community. Providing continuous professional development to classified staff can also transform workplace culture by shifting from fixed mindsets to encouraging a growth mindset in employees and the district (Berkowitz, 2017; Braithwaite et al., 2017; Dweck, 1999; Mlakar, 2019). In addition, according to Duval County Public Schools (n.d.):

> High-quality professional development for all non-instructional personnel (NIP) is provided to close the communication gap between NIP and certificated personnel by

building meaningful relationships and support in our learning community. This will help in increasing the NIP knowledge, skills, aspiration, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to effectively perform in their current position. (para. 1)

## Methodology

A grounded theory approach in qualitative research was used to create a best practice framework for providing professional development to non-instructional staff in a K-12 setting. In order to align the research problem and help the reader understand how results were determined, the qualitative study shows 1) development of research procedures, materials, and tools, 2) recruitment and selection of participants, and 3) data collection and analysis (Rudestam & Newton, 2014). A phenomenological research study "engage a relatively small number of participants" (Rudestam & Newton, 2014). The human experience is essential to this study. This study was conducted to include an open sample of classified and non-instructional staff and business and operational leadership. According to Rudestam and Newton (2014), foreseeing sampling dimensions is difficult. The data collection and analysis process were essential to the research and the application of grounded theory (Sbaraini et al., 2011; Tie et al., 2019). The information gathered from the survey, focus group interview, document review, themes, and patterns determined the outcome of the study.

Grounded theory differs from other qualitative analysis because "it aims at forming a theoretical model of something" (Merriam & Grenier, 2019, p. 212). It is a data-driven model that builds a theoretical model from the ground up by interweaving the processes of data collection and data analysis (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). A phenomenological perspective was used to collect rich and useful data. This perspective came from survey respondents and focus group participants who had experience with the research topic. Rudestam and Newton (2015) described phenomenological research inquiry as "attempts to get beneath how people describe

their experiences" (p. 43). Grounded theory and phenomenological research were used in this study to offer a theoretical explanation of a best practice framework for professional development for classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations. This approach worked well as the researcher analyzed the data to find emerging themes rather than the reliance on a preconceived hypothesis.

## Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher in this grounded theory qualitative approach was to engage classified and non-instructional staff through a survey, conduct a focus group interview of leaders, analyze and compare data, and construct a theory to help understand their perspectives (Al-Dabbagh, 2020; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Sbaraini et al., 2011; Tie et al., 2019). I was committed to studying the professional development experiences of the business and operations classified and non-instructional staff in a school district through the lens of a survey. I interviewed a six member focus group. The interview consisted of open-ended inquiries about how participants describe their experience with professional development, the effect it has on the organizational culture, and the role leadership plays in providing professional development opportunities for business and operations staff. I also requested documentation from the focus group participants that described professional development offerings to their staff or barriers to offering professional development opportunities.

My experience working in several industries throughout my career raised my awareness of the inequities of professional development opportunities provided only to upper leadership. Excluding professional development opportunities for support staff limited the capacity of the workforce, thus minimizing the opportunity for advancement. I have witnessed a vastly different trajectory of leaders given growth opportunities through professional development and the

stifling of support staff not afforded the same growth opportunities. I also noticed little investment allotted for the growth and development of support staff.

My experience as a support staff member makes it important that I maintain my role as a researcher by not allowing my personal biases to interfere with this field of study. I have lived the experiences of being a support staff member and watching those on the leadership track advance through professional development. As a leader, I also experienced advancement from professional development opportunities. While this strengthens my credibility as a researcher, I must ensure I do not misinterpret or misrepresent the data gathered throughout my study.

## Research Assumptions

The researcher of this study holds three primary assumptions. The first assumption of the researcher in this study was that classified staff in business and operations in a school district want ongoing professional development. Academic or certificated staff contractually receive ongoing professional development every year; however, non-academic or classified staff do not receive ongoing professional development. It assumes that classified staff desire this to be an equitable practice.

The second assumption was that professional development for classified staff would grow the organizational culture. This assumed professional development has a positive effect on staff, thus increasing positivity in the workplace culture. For example, reinforcing communication or problem solving through professional development will create an environment of good communicators and problem-solvers. The third assumption was that leadership plays a major role in the growth and professional development of classified staff. This assumption considers the leader has control over the availability of classified staff to engage in professional development. For example, it is up to the leader to make an investment in and provision for the

classified staff to participate in professional development. Without buy-in from the leader, classified staff cannot take part in professional development – especially since it is not contractually mandatory.

As the researcher, I must engage in the focus group interview and participant survey objectively without projecting my feelings or desires for personal and career growth and advancement through professional development. It is important that the findings of this study are credible and trustworthy. While there may be similarities to my experiences, I must remain subjective and challenge my biases as I collect, analyze, and interpret data from survey participants and focus group members.

## Definitions and Terms

*Andragogy:* The study of adult learning focuses on the learner and not the teacher (Education Technology and Mobile Learning, n.d.; Gutierrez, 2018; Knowles, 1978; Mister Simplify, 2021).

*Business and operations leaders:* Any non-academic leadership role, particularly leaders responsible for classified staff. Business and Operations leaders, Operational leaders, Leaders, and Transformational leaders are terms used interchangeably throughout the document.

*Certificated staff:* School instructional staff, such as teachers or principals (Ohio Department of Education, 2015; Ohio Revised Code (ORC), Section 124 (2016).

*Classified, non-instructional, non-certificated, non-teaching, support, business and operations staff, and operational staff:* terms used interchangeably throughout the document: "Those employed in schools . . . but whose position does not require the certification of a teacher or other certified school personnel" (Feuerborn et al., 2018, p. 103)

*Grounded theory:* A qualitative research design that provides a model of practice that connects and shapes data as it is being collected and constructs a theory based on the data being analyzed rather than using the data to support an existing theory (Al-Dabbagh, 2020; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Sbaraini et al., 2011).

*Organizational culture:* "Values, customs, rituals, attitudes, and norms shared by members of an organization, which have to be learned and accepted by new members of the organization" (Oxford Reference, 2022); "the types of attitudes and agreed ways of working shared by the employees of a company or organization" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). The terms organizational culture and workplace culture are often used interchangeably (Braithwaite et al., 2017; Joseph & Kibera, 2019; Schein, 1993). District culture will also be used to describe organizational culture throughout this study.

*Paraprofessionals:* Academic or school-based classified staff that work directly with teachers in the classroom. Paraprofessional, paraeducator, instructional assistants, and instructional aides are used interchangeably in this study.

*Professional development:* The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2019) defined professional development as "a consciously designed, systematic process that strengthens how staff obtain, retain, and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (para 1).

*School-based staff:* Teachers, paraprofessionals, and principals (Admiraal et al., 2021).

*Transformational leadership:* The characteristics of leaders who consider people individually, stimulate them intellectually, motivate and inspire them, and provide the ideal influence for success (Burns, 1978; Khan et al., 2020; Kirby et al., 1992; Leithwood et al., 1992). Transformational leaders, Business and Operations leaders, Operational leaders, and Leaders are terms used interchangeably throughout the document.

## Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter I includes the introduction and background of the study, statement of the problem, the purpose and significance of the study, research questions, methodology, role and assumptions of the researcher, and the definition of terms. Chapter II contains the related literature review and research pertinent to the study. Chapter III describes the methods used in this study, and describes, in detail, the research design, sample selection, participant selection, procedures, and how the data will be analyzed as well as the limitations and delimitation of the study. Chapter IV reviews and examines the data collected in detail. Finally, Chapter V summarizes the findings, introduces the framework for grounded theory, and provides recommendations for further study.

## Summary

Previous research around professional development in education focused on topics tailored to teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school-based academic professionals (Adejare et al., 2020; Admiraal et al., 2021; Antinluoma et al., 2018; Feuerborn et al., 2018; Watkins, 2019; Wiggs et al., 2021). For example, Watkins (2019) discussed professional development offerings that focused on providing technology training to certificated teaching staff. Yet, Antiado et al. (2020) argued that non-teaching staff is as valuable and equally important as the teaching staff (p. 3280): "To ensure its sustainability, professional development programs must focus and benefit the institution, and include both teaching and non-teaching staff" (p. 3280).

# CHAPTER II

# LITERATURE REVIEW

*Workplace culture within which personal growth and professional development are most likely to thrive is basically, an environment that gives people the chance or even pushes them to try new activities and take on new challenges that build on the skills and experiences they have.* (Badaracco, n.d.)

## Introduction

Leaders must be intentional about increasing the capacity of their staff, departments, and the entire school district. The caliber of interpersonal interactions is crucial to the supervisor-support staff relationship (Beenen et al., 2023). They must understand the significance of having a strong workforce that is not only capable of performing a task but also outstanding with professionalism in communicating, solving problems, and resolving conflict. Leaders in education contend with a workforce who are proficient in job-embedded skills (work or hard skills); however, there may be opportunities to enhance their interpersonal and intrapersonal skills (human or soft skills) (Beenen et al.). In situations where interpersonal dynamics are strong, there is evidence of growth and learning for students, success for employees, and satisfaction in customers (Beenen et al.). Yet, there is little consideration that there are levels of learning, understanding, and development. Just as training can enhance work skills, development is also necessary for learning, relearning, and unlearning human skills.

The major objective of this literature review was to discuss extending professional development opportunities for a school district's classified (non-certificated) staff, including both the personal and professional growth of non-teaching staff. The literature review also discussed the connection between professional development and characteristics of the adult learner,

transformational leadership, and the workplace or school culture (Adejare et al., 2020; Berkowitz et al., 2017; Turner, 2002). For the purpose of this literature review, the terms organization, workplace and district were used interchangeably.

In this review of literature, the classified and non-instructional designation includes all staff under the business and operations side of a K-12 district. Feuerborn et al. (2018) labeled classified staff as "important stakeholders" (p. 101). This category of employees includes non-certificated leaders, supervisors, managers, custodians, secretaries, tradespersons, safety and security, human resource professionals, transportation professionals, and all other non-school-based positions. This population of employees is not certificated or instructional staff (Ohio Department of Education, 2015). Paraeducators (instructional aides) make up about half of classified staff, and secretaries, transportation, food service, maintenance, and custodians make up the other half (Bradshaw et al., 2011).

## Background of the Study

### Context for This Study

According to the Ohio Revised Code (ORC), Section 124 (2016), teachers and administrators are certificated staff, whereas the classified staff is the segment of the district that includes all unskilled labor staff members that are not teachers or building administrators and do not require certification and continuing education units (CEUs). Board policies in a large, urban, Midwestern K-12 school district identified classified staff as non-teaching employees in a teaching profession. Loeb (2016) described non-teaching adults as "basic services staff [and] adults [who] work in the central office" (para. 3).

In many urban school districts in the Midwest, ongoing professional development is available to certificated staff but not extended to classified staff. The Ohio Department of

Education (ODE) (2015) stated a "strong relationship exists between educational leadership, professional learning, teaching knowledge and practices, and student results" (para. 1). As a result, certificated staff are expected to receive ongoing and continuous professional development (Ohio Revised Code, Section 124, 2016) and have adequate ongoing professional development opportunities in a K-12 setting (Ohio Department of Education, 2015). Classified staff, however, do not receive adequate ongoing professional development opportunities in a K-12 setting, despite the lasting impact professional development has on workplace culture and adult learning (Adejare et al., 2020; Gander & McInnes, 2021; Ohio Revised Code, 2016; Onday, 2016; Schein, 1993; Turner, 2002; Weiss Bros., n.d.).

The Ohio Revised Code (ORC) (2012), Section 3319.071 has established a professional development program for teachers with costs reimbursed upon successful completion by the teacher. According to the Ohio Revised Code (ORC), Section 3319.074 (2019), establishing professional development qualifications for teachers includes determining the types of professional development, managing the professional development budget, determining the use of internal process-owners or external vendors, and developing growth and improvement plans for teachers. This standard practice is fundamental to the business world (Turner, 2002). These standards could also apply to creating robust professional development programming for classified staff. However, while paraprofessionals receive sporadic professional learning opportunities (Wiggs et al., 2021), the Code does not mention professional development for classified staff. Neither the Ohio Department of Education (2015) nor the Ohio Revised Code (2012, 2016, 2018, 2019) mentioned providing professional development for the classified staff. How then can the culture and climate of the educational system succeed in having shared norms and values with this group excluded?

The leader must be on a mission to close the growth, knowledge, and development gap for classified staff in business and operations by providing continuous professional development opportunities to them throughout each school year. Professional development is one way to improve evaluative measures (such as skills, attitudes, and abilities) and remediate weaknesses. District B recognized the importance of implementing a program of classified staff member evaluations for the purpose of promoting individual job performance and improving services to students. The district suggested that training is a prerequisite for [the] continued growth of staff, and, therefore, encourages the participation of classified staff members in in-service and other training programs. However, while in-service training is encouraged, professional development for classified staff is not mentioned nor required. This study sought to develop a theoretical and practical framework for providing high-quality professional development for classified staff.

**Classified Staff's Contribution**

The contribution of classified staff to student achievement is often lost on leaders. Rather the focus is often on those who are in direct contact with students. However, while teachers and paraprofessionals play a hands-on role in educating students and influencing student success, personnel on the business and operations side of the district are also instrumental in creating an environment for both the teacher to teach and the student to learn with success (Turner, 2002).

Smilowitz and Keppler (2020) stated that transportation increases children's access to school. The transportation department is not limited to bus drivers. It also consists of the call-center or customer-service representatives, those who plan bus routes, supervisors, maintenance staff, and trainers.

The tradesmen and women in the department of building and grounds also create conditions for student achievement and maintain safe learning environments for students. For

example, imagine issues with heating in the winter and cooling in the spring, decayed shelving, unsightly or overgrown weeds and shrubs, outdated electronics and technology, leaky faucets or toilets that did not flush, old or chipped paint, and insufficient heating and cooling that drives up heating and cooling costs. These all have a negative impact on student achievement (Turner, 2002).

Custodial services also impact the school building environment daily; they create sanitary conditions for students, teachers, and other building staff and an "overall professional appearance of school facilities" (Turner, 2002). According to Weiss Bro. (n.d.), "custodians play an essential role in the success of many organizations and are one of the most crucial components to maintaining a clean, safe, and healthy environment for all" (para 1). Professional development also assists custodians in their interactions and enhances their "ability to manage conflict, work as a team, and communicate ideas" (para. 13).

Hunger is a barrier to teaching a child (Turner, 2002). Food service workers provide food nourishment to children in a K-12 setting. Cafeteria-worker knowledge extends past the nutrition value of food and includes basic knowledge about students (Turner, 2002). Providing continuous professional development to assist with relationship building, communication, and problem solving could enhance the food service professional's ability to support student achievement.

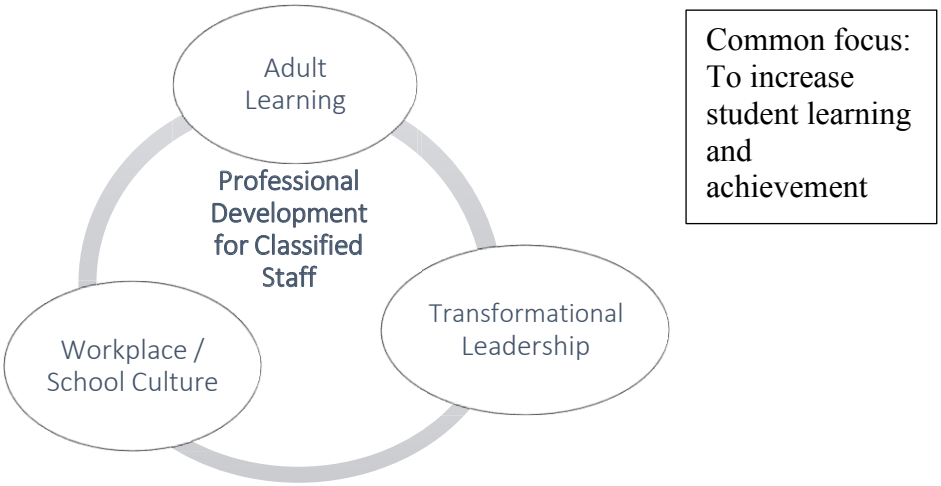
The responsibility of secretaries goes beyond managing the school office and keeping records. The secretary also handles all human interaction and is "the first point of contact students, parents, and community have with a school building" (Turner, 2002, p. 27). Secretaries must communicate effectively both in person and by phone. They are the face of the building.

In short, there is a connection between classified staff development and student achievement (Leithwood, 1990; Turner, 2002). Teacher and student achievement are also related

to the school culture and to a leader's decision to make professional development available to their workforce (Joseph & Kibera, 2019; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1991; Mourao, 2017; Schein, 1993; Turner, 2002). Although professional development provides opportunities to transform staff (Leithwood, 1990; Turner, 2002), effective professional development is contingent on adult learning. Thus, adult learning theories, workplace culture theory, and transformational leadership theory all provide a relevant theoretical framework (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Constructs Related to Professional Development*




*Note.* Professional development is related to adult learning, transformational leadership, and workplace/school culture.

## Theoretical Framework

### Andragogy Theory

All staff in the educational setting, including classified staff, are considered adult learners. Key understandings of adult learning stem from Malcolm Knowles's (1978) research on andragogy. The term "andragogy" was created in 1833, but Knowles developed the concept in 1978 (Mister Simplify, 2021). Study of andragogy differentiates adult learning from child learning, known as pedagogy (Gutierrez, 2018). Approaches to pedagogy often are teacher-

centric whereas andragogy focuses on the learner (Education Technology and Mobile Learning, 2013; Gutierrez, 2018; Mister Simplify, 2021). Students are often not the focus of pedagogy and teachers are not the focus of andragogy (Gutierrez, 2018).

Knowles asked about adult learners' knowledge of how, what, and why learning was important (Hogue, 2019). He determined adults engaged in learning when they had shared control of the learning process, including self-direction, reliance on prior experience, and readiness to learn (Gutierrez, 2018; Hogue, 2019; Kharbach, n.d.; Mister Simplify, 2021). According to Knowles (1978), "the learner should be actively involved in the learning process" (p. 11). Turner (2002) suggested adult learners would seek learning opportunities as they evolve through life-changing experiences. Donaldson and Scannell (1986) identified six concepts of learning: (1) learning is a self-activity, (2) people learn at different rates, (3) learning is a continuous and continual process, (4) learning results from stimulation to the senses, (5) positive reinforcement enhances learning, and (6) people learn best by doing.

**Experiential Learning Theory**

Experience is the focus of the experiential learning approach for adult learners. David Kolb described this as a process of learning that brings understanding and empowerment to adult learners (Institute for Experiential Learning, n.d.). According to the Institute for Experiential Learning (n.d.), "the way you learn is the way you approach life in general" (para. 2). The way adults learn determines how they face challenges, solve problems, and make decisions (Institute for Experiential Learning, n.d.; Kharbach, n.d; Kolb & Plovnick, 1974; Turner, 2002).

Kolb described the learning cycle as a four-step process that includes experience, reflection, thinking, and action as one learns about one's own learning process as well as learning competencies in subject specifics (Institute for Experiential Learning, 2021; Kharbach,

n.d.). Being aware of one's learning style influences how adults interact in relationships and on teams (Duff, 2019; Kolb & Plovnick, 1974). A leader must also encourage intellectual stimulation that challenges the status quo and supports adult creativity and self-direction (Duff, 2019; Institute for Experiential Learning, n.d.; Kirby et al., 1992). According to Kirby et al. (1992), school leaders are proud of their workforces' accomplishments and success. Leaders armed with the knowledge of adult learning make the workplace culture conducive to staff achievement and success and are transformational leaders (Joseph & Kibera, 2019; Khan et al., 2020; Kirby et al., 1992; Leithwood, 1990; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1991).

**Transformational Leadership Theory**

Transformational leaders transform their environments (Anderson, 2017; Burns, 1978; Kirby et al., 1992). Key organizational outcomes have been attributed to leadership as the primary driver of employee learning and performance as well as the creation of a conducive culture for human resource development (Akdere & Egan, 2020). Kirby et al. (1992) described transformational leadership as "development-oriented for the purposes of change" (p. 303). There are four components of transformational leadership (Leithwood et al., 1992): to consider people individually, stimulate them intellectually, motivate and inspire them, and provide the ideal influence for success (Burns, 1978; Khan et al., 2020; Kirby et al., 1992; Leithwood et al., 1992).) Transformational leaders strengthen followers by elevating their needs perspectives and offering chances for them to grow into their potential (Kirby et al., 1992).

Transformational leaders advocate for staff development and encourage problem solving and decision making (Burns, 1978; Dweck, 1999, Kirby et al., 1992; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1991; Leithwood et al., 1992). The learning that takes place during staff development promotes organizational growth (Khan et al., 2020; Kirby et al., 1992) and school improvement (Turner,

2002). A leader with a growth mindset promotes a learning environment (Dweck, 1999; Mlakar, 2019). Change comes by providing adult staff learners with professional development. Turner (2002) ascertained, "The benefit of staff development is its focus with changing the behavior and/or attitudes of staff members by addressing the real needs of the educational organization" (p. 60). Transformational leaders work hard to change and transform the workplace culture. Akdere and Egan (2020) found that in the U.S. healthcare setting, transformational leaders exhibit behaviors that are in line with the culture of human resource development by promoting employee growth and performance. According to Anderson (2017), transformational leadership is the best type of leadership for schools in the 21st century.

**Organizational Culture Theory**

According to Paais and Pattiruhu (2020), leadership has a beneficial effect on organizational culture. Workplace culture is a system of shared meaning and beliefs (Khan et al., 2020; Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020; Rajoo, 2020; Schein, 1993; Tsai, 2011). Schein (1993) determined:

> Culture is both a dynamic phenomenon that surrounds us at all times, being constantly enacted and created by our interactions with others and shaped by leadership behavior, and a set of structures, routines, rules, and norms that guide and constrain behavior. (p. 1)

According to Schein (1993), culture provides an embedded structure for employees, who give this system meaning. Leaders are responsible to create organizational structures (Khan et al., 2020; Orta, 2015; Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020) such that the workplace culture takes on the leader's identity, assumptions, beliefs, and values. Leaders have the power to change the workplace culture (Orta, 2015; Rajoo, 2020; Schein, 1993). The leader intentionally or

unintentionally creates organizational culture (Kahn et al., 2020; Orta, 2015, Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020; Rajoo, 2020; Schein, 1993).

Employees are entrenched in a positive or negative environment (Rajoo, 2020; Schein, 1993). Shared assumptions, shared beliefs, and shared values are essential for a positive culture as compared to a negative culture where leaders may impose their own systems without the input or consideration of the workforce (Rajoo, 2020; Schein, 1993). Schein (1993) discovered cultural situations required perspective or "seeing the world through a cultural lens" (p. 7). In other words, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to workplace culture. Leaders must go a step further and define the culture so employee groups understand their adopted culture. When formed correctly, organizational culture can be a glue that bonds employees and the system in a way that produces creativity and innovation (Kahn et al., 2020).

Leaders provide training for technical skills of day-to-day work performance (Rajoo, 2020; Schein, 1993). However, building a robust culture goes beyond learning skills. A culture with a growth mindset requires developing the self-awareness and social skills of the workforce (Dweck, 1999; Turner, 2002). Kahn et al. (2020) distinguished transactional and transformational leaders by identifying transactional leaders as "more task-oriented and transformational leadership as relationship-oriented" (p. 6). Transformational leaders improve the culture through communication, interpersonal relationships, problem solving, and decision making as they create a culture of ongoing professional development (Schein, 1993).

## Professional Development and the Adult Learner

### Definition of Professional Development

Professional development is defined as "the development of competence or expertise in one's profession; the process of acquiring the skills needed to improve performance in a job"

(Oxford Online Dictionary, 2022, para. 1). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2019) defined professional development as "a consciously designed, systematic process that strengthens how staff obtain, retain, and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (para 1). The Center (2019) considered professional development as "an excellent way to teach specific learning objectives to a targeted group" (para. 1). Hallmark et al. (2021) defined professional development as training and exercises that enhance role-specific simulation abilities.

**Engaging Learners**

Effective professional development starts with high-quality content. This phase is important to adult learning because adults are content-oriented, prefer choice, bring a wealth of experiences, and are driven by goals and purpose (Cochran & Brown, 2016; Duff, 2019; Institute for Experiential Learning, 2021; Mukhalalati & Taylor, 2019; Pappas, 2013; Watkins, 2019). Learning standards provided by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) (2015) for teachers include continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment. These standards are also fundamental for creating professional development content and presentations for classified staff. The professional development program will fail if the content, presentations, and training platforms do not engage the adult learner (Knowles, 1978; Kolb,1984). The learner will not view it as a valuable resource for future use (Institute for Experiential Learning, 2021).

When approaching professional development from the lens of leading the work, the transformational leader must consider the things that make the programming meaningful: authentic (relevant) learning, self-directed (one's own learning), transformational (new meaning) learning, and experiential learning cycle (the process of learning) must be considered when developing programming (Gutierrez, 2018; Merriam, 2001). The leader must ensure differentiated content is created to appeal to different learning styles.

**Providing Continuous Job-Related Training**

Professional development also occurs over time, consistent with andragogy theory, which holds that adult learning is a continuous and continual process (Donaldson & Scannell, 1986). Nutwell et al. (2023) shared "Traditional delivery of professional development programming is an isolated workshop-style offering" (p. 116). For example, the CDC (2019) distinguished training from workshops citing the difference between the long-term benefits of training to increased short-term awareness from workshops. A report by Cabot Public Schools (n.d.) in Lonoke County, Arkansas stated that the purpose of professional development is to "improve knowledge and skills to facilitate individual, school-wide, and districtwide improvements for the purpose of increasing student achievement" (para. 1). Knowledge, according to Antiado et al. (2020) "focuses on the understanding of concepts" (p. 3281). The authors determined that skills are trained competencies and ability is the skill to do something (Antiado et al., 2020). In other words, one could know something (knowledge) but not be trained (skilled) or capable (ability) of excelling at that thing. Professional development can equip staff with sharpening their knowledge, skill, and ability (Antiado et al., 2020).

For example, teachers have specific learning that is related to their profession and classified staff develop their professional skills according to their profession. The clear difference between professional learning and professional development is that learning is the result of being taught (i.e., to communicate, to write); whereas, development is the result of a discovery that goes beyond learning (i.e., to communicate well, to write fully developed sentences). Piaget surmised in his Cognitive Development Theory, that "problem-solving skills cannot be taught, they must be discovered" (McLeod, 2022). A practical example that captures the difference between learning and developing is cooking. A person could learn to cook but

discovering new ideas through continuous practicing, experimenting, trial and error develop good or great cooking skills. In sum, learning is not equal to developing—it is only the first step. Zhukova (2018) considered professional development to be "the result of learning processes, directed towards the acquisition of an interrelated whole of knowledge, insights, and skills" (2018, p. 103). Turner (2002) also explained that staff development would improve performance, behavior, and school culture.

For Mourao (2017), professional development is a life-long process "corresponding to the growth and maturation of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes acquired throughout the worker's lives, as a result of formal and informal actions of learning at work" (p. 3). The author stated, "Professional development is therefore associated with the acquisition and development of competencies involving cognitive, affective, and psychomotor processes" (Mourao, 2017, p. 5).

Examination of the structures that exist to support continuous professional development reveals that classified and non-instructional staff are often without these structures. However, literature on continuous professional development for licensed and instructional staff suggested that professional learning communities (PLCs) are the formats through which much of this professional development occurs. DuFour and Eaker (1998) formalized the PLC model, describing it as a means by which to direct continuous teacher learning toward the goal of improving student achievement. According to DuFour and Eaker, PLCs can be structured flexibly, involving teachers grouped in a wide variety of ways. Critically, though, PLCs should, as a best practice, focus on shared goals that emerge from classroom practice with collaborative solutions that can be implemented right away in the classroom. Without a structure like PLCs to inform continuous professional development practice for classified and non-instructional staff, it

will be difficult to ensure the continuous and job-related nature of professional development for this population.

Additional challenges regarding this kind of continuous professional development for classified and non-instructional staff regard what are considered job-related skills. While teachers have licensing requirements aligned with a set of standards for professional practice (Darling-Hammond & Miller, 1992), classified and non-instructional staff lack both the requirement of licensure and the set of specific standards to which staff members must act in their positions. Darling-Hammond and Miller (1992), leading the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), developed a set of licensing standards for new teachers that were then adopted by more than 40 states. Later work by Hammond (2001) linked the need for standards with goals that include student achievement and educational equity. Given that the collective work of school staff, regardless of the role, is to promote student learning, it follows that doing so means holding all staff members to high standards of practice—and defining those practices in the first place.

Defining standards of practice can then enable the use of more rigorous, focused evaluations of that practice. Currently, teachers are subject to these evaluations, often using a model like the one developed by Danielson (2013), who divided instructional practice into 26 core competencies across five domains: Planning and Preparation, The Classroom Environment, Instruction, Professional Responsibilities, and Student Growth. Without standards of the kind developed by Darling-Hammond and Miller (1992) or standards-aligned evaluation tools like the one developed by Danielson (2013), classified and non-instructional staff lack the structures that can give rise to relevant and continuous professional development activities that enable participants to further add job-related skills.

## Improving Professional Development for Classified Staff

Sancar et al. (2021) ascertained that teachers undoubtedly need to be lifelong learners; however, all staff need opportunities for growth, knowledge, and development, not just teachers and building administrators. Leaders must be open to extending professional development to the classified staff; however, the classified staff must also be open to learning ways to develop. This concept is important to the content and presentation phase in creating and providing professional development. According to Cochran and Brown (2016), whereas teachers are the center of children learning, the learner is the center focus of adult learning. The authors discussed contributing factors to adult learning as the need to know why they need to learn, their experiences, readiness to learn, learning style, and motivation to learn. These are conditions for leaders to consider when providing professional learning and development opportunities. However, Feuerborn et al. (2018) observed that only 9% of school-based classified staff found professional development to be helpful, which suggests room for improvement.

**Understanding the why of learning**. Duff (2019) concluded that adults pursued learning when they knew why they were learning. For classified staff, professional development can sharpen interpersonal (people-smart) and intrapersonal (self-smart) intelligence (Examined Existence Team, n.d.). These skills work alongside professional learning. This is why leaders need to provide growth, knowledge, and development opportunities to all staff.

Antiado et al. (2020) conducted a study on non-academic staff's interest in different topics of professional development. The participants worked in higher education; however, non-teaching staff in a K-12 setting need the same training. The research showed a higher interest in job development and personal goal achievement than in job burnout. Topics mentioned in their study that could apply to classified staff were improving communication skills, organizational

skills, personal and professional ethics, team building, customer service, time management, managing change, diversity, and conflict resolution (Antiado et al., 2020). Lai et al. (2017) also identified communication, mentorship, cultural diversity, and other interpersonal skills as a means of workplace integration. Cultural diversity is instrumental in organizational growth, development, and talent retention (Antiado et al., 2020).

Additionally, Antiado et al. (2020) argued, "It is very important that non-academic staff have the knowledge and basic idea about the nature of the business they are dealing with" (p. 3281). This could help classified staff better understand the perspectives of certificated staff.

> High-quality professional development for all non-instructional personnel (NIP) is provided to close the communication gap between NIP and certificated personnel by building meaningful relationships and support in our learning community. This will help in increasing the NIP knowledge, skills, aspiration, attitudes and behaviors necessary to effectively perform in their current position. (Duval County Public Schools, n.d., para. 1)

Non-instructional staff development not only increases skills but also increases job satisfaction and contribution to the school environment (Harper, 2018; Turner, 2002).

**Soft-skills training**. Soft-skills training in dealing with relationship issues is an important area for professional development. According to Leithwood (1990), "teachers are likely to grow as they acquire the attributes associated with a collaborative professional image" (p. 100). Paraprofessional participants also desire training outside the normal job-embedded training to include improvement in intangible behavioral change (Wiggs et al., 2021). For example, computer skills are job-embedded skills, but computer training does not help to resolve a conflict.

Bus drivers and other classified staff communicate with students, parents, coworkers, leaders, the community, vendors, and other stakeholders involved in the district. While technical or job-embedded skills are necessary, so too are communication, relationship, and other interpersonal skills important to this department (Turner, 2002). According to Harper (2017), bus drivers can teach social-emotional skills to students outside the traditional classroom: "If trained properly, bus drivers can provide a positive link between the student's home environment and school, and they can foster social-emotional learning skills" (p. 6). Harper (2017) also stated that other support staff (e.g., food service and maintenance) play a role in providing a link between home and school for students because they see things teachers may not see (e.g., bullying, abuse).

However, Bradshaw et al. (2013) found that while bus drivers witnessed a lot of bullying—in part because some work in unstructured areas like the cafeteria or playground—they felt ill-equipped to handle bullying, including bullying associated with racial and gender issues (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Bradshaw et al., 2011; DeLara, 2008; Leff et al., 2003). According to DeLara (2008), classified staff observe a significant amount of bullying, but some have part-time work hours that prevent them from attending district safety training. Additionally, while these professionals work closely with students, parents, and the community, the typical focus of their training is job-specific (National Education Association, 2003). They are not provided the proper training and development to intervene in bullying or other prevention situations (Bradshaw et al., 2013). Classified staff may also be victims of bullying by staff and sometimes students due to their lower status relative to teachers; classified staff do not have the same credentials, salaries, autonomy and control over their work that teachers do (Bradshaw et al., 2013; Bradshaw & Figiel, 2012). However, scholars suggest all staff should be involved in

bullying training as part of professional training and development (Furlong et al., 2003; Srabstein et al., 2008).

**Need for more time for training**. The CDC (2019) described the term training as "an instructional experience provided primarily by employers for employees, designed to develop new skills and knowledge that are expected to be applied immediately upon arrival or return to the job" (para 5). Watkins (2019) noted that professional development is calendared in school districts for teachers and superintendents. However, while classified staff receive job-embedded training required for job performance, ongoing professional development opportunities are not equal to professional learning opportunities granted to teachers, principals, and paraprofessionals. Admiraal et al. (2021) shared that professional learning opportunities should be made available to all staff.

Although paraprofessionals work in the classroom alongside teachers, paraprofessional training-time is lacking (Wiggs et al., 2021). The extent of "paraprofessional training occurs on the job and is provided by teacher supervisors" (Wiggs et al., 2021, p. 2240). This training is often insufficient due to teachers not having enough time or resources to train their classroom aid properly (Wiggs et al., 2021). Paraprofessionals in the study reported that they received professional development tailored to their work but designed for other school staff. Wiggs et al. (2021) also found that professional development consisted of a one-time workshop within a 1-year period. The authors surmised this "form of training fails to facilitate knowledge transfer" (Wiggs et al., 2021, p. 2250).

Additionally, about a fourth of classified staff are part-time employees (Bradshaw et al., 2011). Harper (2018) mentioned that coordinating time schedules with bus drivers could be a challenge when providing professional development. According to Wiggs et al. (2021), ongoing

education helps people become more effective on the job and in their lives; one time training workshops are not sufficient to foster behavior change. Follow-up training through continuous professional development is necessary to improve learning and behavioral experiences (Wiggs et al., 2021). Participants in the Antiado et al. (2020) study also believed "the amount of time they spent in training and development will further prepare them for a better work and position in the years ahead" (p. 3283).

**Differentiated learning.** Turner (2002) also argued that "training must meet the specific needs of the individual employee" (p. 62). Professional development taps into the potential of employees, leverages their different expertise and perspectives, and transforms individuals and the workplace (Connolly & James, 1998; Institute for Experiential Learning, 2021). One way to make professional development meaningful is to create differentiated content that appeals to different learning styles and roles. Figure 2 provides examples of learning content (on the right) that might be tailored differently according to the learner's job role (on the left).

**Figure 2**

*Professional Development Topics and Classified Staff Who Could Receive Training*

| Non-teaching staff | * | Professional Development Topics |
|---|---|---|
| Business and Operations | S | Conflict Resolution |
| Buildings & Grounds | A | Customer Services |
| Custodial Services | M | De-escalation |
| Data Communication | P | Diversity, Equity, Inclusion |
| Food Services | L | Improving Communication Skills |
| Grants/State & Federal Funds | E | Leadership |
| Human Resources | T | Managing Change |
| Information Technology (IT) | O | Problem-Solving |
| Paraprofessional | P | Social Emotional Learning |
| Safety & Security | I | Stress Management |
| Secretarial Services | C | Team Building |
| Transportation | S | Time Management |

*Figure 2.* Column 1 includes a sample of classified staff on the business and operational side of the school district. Column 2 includes a sample of professional development topics.

One example is conducting professional development on the topic of communications. While the crux of the message may be the same across staff groups, the content, presentation, and platform for custodial services will be different from the content for human resources. Staff in each area have different experiences and expectations so the training method has to be different to meet the needs of the individual and department (Mourao, 2017). Technology is another example of differentiated professional development. Digital competence is increasingly important (Williams, 2020). Secretaries, maintenance, food service, teachers, custodians, and bus drivers use technology differently.

**Situational learning and critical thinking.** According to Gutierrez (2018), the goal of adult learning is to "create effective learning experiences" (p. 2). Another goal of professional development is to help employees understand how situational concepts influence their perspective, which increases the effectiveness of thoughts and behaviors (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). As Gutierrez (2018) discussed, there are three stages in professional learning for teachers (a) identifying a dilemma, (b) considering its personal relevance, and (c) engaging in critical thinking. Transformational leaders must consider different actions, situations, and performance goals when creating systems that influence the adult's intrinsic need for improvement (Mourao, 2017). These can become topics for group discussion. However, Zhukova (2018) also noted that additional requirements like systems thinking, sustainability thinking, and attitudes would be a challenge for novice teachers. These are also challenges that classified staff face.

Adults approach life based on the way they learn (Institute for Experiential Learning, 2021; Sternberg, 1997). This is key to designing professional development that will bring about change. Learning to change is not evident to some adults because they were not exposed to things that require them to change (Sternberg, 1997). According to Dweck (1999), a growth

mindset believes in the possibility of change. Leaders and adults who believe people cannot learn and develop have a fixed mindset and those who believe people can learn have a growth mindset (Dweck, 1999; Lubow, 2016; Mlakar, 2019; Ziegler, 2017). David Kolb named experience, reflection, thinking, and action as the four-step process of learning (Institute for Experiential Learning, 2021). When adult learners reflect on what they know, apply it to situations, and decide how to act, they are more likely to develop a growth mindset. Professional development may, in turn, lead adult learners on a journey of self-discovery, knowledge, growth, and development (Duff, 2019; Leithwood, 1990; Maslow, 1967; Merriam, 2001; Renbarger & Davis, 2019; Sternberg, 1997).

## Professional Development and School Culture

The present body of research on teacher learning places an excessive amount of emphasis on individual instructors, activities, and programs, ignoring the influence of the institutional or school system setting (Admiraal et al., 2021; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). According to Opfer and Pedder (2011), schools must adopt the procedures and methods of learning organizations if they are to provide the environment necessary to maximize and maintain teacher learning. Senge (1990) coined the concept of learning organization and defined it as "a place where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set fee, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3). Learning districts are characterized by structures that support their employees' professional development (Admiraal et al., 2021; Senge, 1990). Although the research is limited to teachers, the concept of developing employees within a learning organization must also include classified and non-instructional staff.

## Creating a Culture of Development

Professional development will expand knowledge and skills if it resonates with the staff (Gutierrez, 2018; Knowles, 1978). For it to work, leaders and classified staff should shift from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset about professional development (Dweck, 1999; Gutierrez, 2018), viewing knowledge-sharing among all staff as crucial for organizational achievement (Swanson et al., 2020). A report from Cabot Public Schools (n.d.) stated that quality professional development contained deep knowledge about content, resources to support learning, knowledge about human learning and change, and high expectations for staff and student achievement.

It is difficult to measure development. Behavior is not data; therefore, it is not measured in the same way as training and learning (Zhukova, 2018). For example, a quiz or test results can determine a level or measure of learning but development comes through exposure, experience, and mindset (Dweck, 1999, McLeod, 2022). Zhukova (2018) attributed competence to increased experience, knowledge, and practice. Development takes time and practice (McLeod, 2022; Zhukova, 2018).

**Attitudes about knowledge and practice**. Offering professional development will not transform staff or the district if it does not cater to the needs of the adult learner (Institute for Experiential Learning, 2021). Leaders must incorporate a culture of development by "embracing knowledge as a strategic asset" (Mourao, 2017). This does not mean inundating staff with training. According to Lee and Desjardins (2019), increasing participation rates are not equivalent to equitable access" (p. 2). Creating a culture of development involves providing and allowing access to growth opportunities. Examples are offering incentives, creating a training calendar of offerings, providing access to training recordings, and allotting monthly hours dedicated to growth and development. In their study, Admiraal et al. (2021) concluded that

impact is sustainable when the workplace culture has embedded professional learning. This will encourage the workforce to work toward the shared vision of the organization and lead to increased staff capacity and continuous improvement.

Keidan's (2020) qualitative study also found that churches and businesses needed time to promote and transform learning and did so by creating organizational cultures and structures "designed to foster the well-being of those with whom they work" (p. iii). Keidan also found that identity expansion, personal mastery, and systems thinking were linked to learning, but that it takes time to learn "a new way of being in the world" (p. 18). After new learning, leaders need to give their staff time to practice this new way and the autonomy to do so imperfectly (Keidan). This literature review lends to the argument of providing professional development to classified staff. Leaders who find value in this concept experience growth and expansion in their staff members and in the workplace. However, lack of psychological safety (risk taking) and information-sharing stifle productive organizational learning (Keidan). The study helps provide insight on how to move the needle from becoming a learning organization to fostering a continuous developing organization.

**Cultivating expertise for professional development**. Fink and Markholt (2013) observed that one professional learning expert could enhance skill development. The authors named the building administrator as the expert for teachers. The professional development expert for the classified staff would be the content facilitator.

A robust organization is one that promotes excellence in learning and performance (Akdere & Egan, 2020). A plan for responsive practices also includes developing content for cultural self-awareness and consulting with appropriate stakeholders to incorporate diverse views in the training (Diffen, 2017; Maslow, 1967). Collaborating with the equity department to

minimize or eliminate biases and developing inclusive programming that encompasses various staff experiences and backgrounds makes development meaningful (Diffen, 2017; Duff, 2019).

None of this matters if the adult learner is not involved in his or her growth and development (Duff, 2019; Lee & Desjardins, 2019; McLeod, 2022). To provide a truly transformative experience, a leader must use multiple assessment tools to inquire about staff needs and evaluate the effectiveness of programming. Learners who have an interest in and voice in their learning opportunities will be more committed to participating in the learning, more apt to learn, and will find new ways to transform their thinking (D'Antoni, 2019; Duff, 2019; Lee & Desjardins, 2019; McLeod, 2022; Mukhalalati & Taylor, 2019). This will boost their confidence, productivity, and job satisfaction (Anderson, 2017; Connolly & James, 1998; Renbarger & Davis, 2019).

**Improving School Culture**

According to Schneider et al. (2017), leaders influence climate and innovation: "For example, socialization processes, team processes, and leadership together play central roles in shaping climate and culture" (p. 30). Organizational issues are minimized when leaders create a learning culture (including professional development) that transfers expected organizational norms and values throughout the workplace (Schneider et al., 2017; Swanson, 2020).

Mlakar (2019) stated, "Leadership influences school climate, and school climate impacts student achievement" (p. 3). The relationship between leadership and workplace culture requires leaders to establish the desired workplace culture. However, according to Schneider et al. (2017), many leaders accept the workplace culture they inherited rather than develop the desired workforce organizational behavior. Renowned author, Edgar Schein (1993), described leadership and culture as "two sides of the same coin" (p. 10).

In order to understand the impact continuous professional development has on the workplace, it is important to understand first how workplace relationships affect the workplace culture. Joseph and Kibera (2019) described organizational culture as how people treat each other based on their values, beliefs, and attitudes about the organizational systems and structures (Duff, 2019). According to Rajoo (2020) "workplace culture supports a positive and productive environment" (p. 147) which nurtures meaningful workplace relationships and creates a climate of learning and development. Higher-quality workplace relationships bring people with shared values together and generate a positive environment, whereas lack of relations in the workplace creates a negative environment and breeds an unsatisfying culture (Braithwaite et al., 2017),

According to Joseph and Kibera (2019), people who work well together also create a synergy and flow with each other towards a common goal as they implement the belief and value system of the organization and work together to keep the momentum going. Innovation is apparent and the freedom of creativity is endless. However, workplace cultures that do not foster a healthy and strong workplace may have problems with stagnating production and low retention (Joseph & Kibera, 2019; Coventry et al., 2015). It will cost a company more money if they have to continually recruit employees (Coventry et al, 2015). Staff turnover, attrition, and absences also influence school processes (Smilowtz & Keppler, 2020). Leaders cannot neglect the human perspective and relationship-building aspect of the workforce (Swanson et al., 2020).

## Professional Development and Transformational Leadership

Anderson (2017) defined transformational leadership as shared leadership that influences morale and inspires high achievement and performance. According to Anderson (2017), business organizations have benefitted from transformational leadership. This leadership style engages classified staff by transforming their thinking, boosting their confidence, improving their

productivity, and increasing their job satisfaction (Anderson, 2017; Burns, 1978; Renbarger & Davis, 2019).

**Providing Opportunities for Professional Development**

Leadership plays a vital role in providing opportunities for staff to participate in their own growth and development (Zhukova, 2018). A leader often has growth opportunities, but the general workforce does not have the same opportunities (Leithwood, 1990). All staff have a right to opportunities for growth, knowledge, and development, but the leader must support this effort (Admiraal et al., 2021). A transformational leader provides those opportunities through professional development programming. Transformational leaders exhibit the characteristics of a growth mindset (Anderson, 2017; Dweck, 1999). Meeting people where they are and providing growth opportunities is essential for adult-learner transformation.

The role of the transformational leader in training and development is to create systems for providing high-level professional development programming by identifying stakeholders, determining the level of the audience, removing barriers, and assessing what the staff knows, needs to know, and becomes (Mourao, 2017). Providing professional development is an investment in staff and the success of the organization (Turner, 2002).

**Improving School Development**

According to Connolly and James (1998), leaders are also responsible for improvement of the district; professional development can play a role in the school-improvement "journey" (p. 271) and in "moving the school between phases" (p. 275). Professional development gives staff confidence in the value they offer the district (Weiss Bros., n.d.). The staff becomes more structured and focused once the professional development need is determined (Connolly & James, 1998).

Connolly and James (1998) noted that there is a correlation between the quality of professional development and the quality of leadership. Schools that do not have a well-developed improvement plan tend to suffer from low staff involvement. Professional development tends to consist of one-off (i.e., one-time) training courses, with "no formal allocation of specific responsibility for the planning and evaluation of professional development activities" [for staff] (p. 275). Professional development is also not tied to the school plan. In particular, non-teaching staff do not perceive any need for school change.

However, a well-developed school plan increases collaboration and teamwork and improves problem solving (Connolly & James, 1998). Providing continuous professional development to all staff also assists with establishing a new approach to staff members' working together on specific issues (Connolly & James), which breaks departmental barriers, increases staff ownership, and empowers individuals with the opportunity to "unlock their potential rather than [just] bring them up to standard" (Connolly & James, p. 277).

Connolly and James (1998) also found that a framework called Investors in People (IiP)—which joined human resource strategy with business strategy—helped in managing change, developed the district's corporate image, and identified training needs for all staff: "The schools give high priority to devising effective strategies for the continuing professional and personal development of all their staff and creating a climate for that development" (p. 278). Training can be provided externally; however, as staff become more experienced and confident, they may also provide training in-house themselves (Connolly & James). Thus, professional development was a key contributor to school improvement and vice-versa.

### Building Support and Success for Leaders

Antinluoma et al. (2018) also thought that implementing professional learning opportunities not only builds the capacity of the workforce but increases school collaboration and builds social capital as a means of support for leaders. Classified staff also contribute to the school's social capital. According to Swanson et al. (2020), "Well-performing service employees can be an asset and leaders play a critical role in influencing employees' performance and the organization's success" (p. 88). The authors explained social capital as a relationship between leaders and followers realized when common goals are created and trust is built (Swanson et al., 2020). The organization and the community benefit from this connection (Swanson et al., 2020).

High and low levels of job satisfaction both have a direct impact on productivity. Providing professional learning opportunities to staff will provide competitive advantage and set the business apart from other organizations (Joseph & Kibera, 2019). Leaders who do not align professional development with the strategic goals of the organization will be costly to the organization (King et al., 2020). This could affect the allocation of resources and reduce motivation (King et al., 2020). Providing relevant professional development opportunities has a positive effect on organizational culture; with strong leadership, adult learners will be motivated to learn and experience maximum impact over time.

## Conclusion

Professional development affects the adult learner, leadership roles, workplace culture, and the impact each has on student achievement. Leadership directly impacts student achievement by providing continuous professional development opportunities to classified staff. Leadership is responsible for creating an environment conducive to learning and development.

The aim of professional development is to grow the knowledge and skill of a professional. It is an investment in the human capital of the workforce. Education is fundamental to obtaining knowledge and skill and builds the capacity of professionals (Duff, 2019). Studies show that leaders influence the workplace culture and those who provide professional learning opportunities move the organizational culture closer to a shared vision, value, and belief system (Admiraal et al., 2021; Anderson, 2017; Antinluoma et al., 2018; Baithwaite et al., 2017; Hogue, 2019; Leithwood, 1990; Leithwood & Janzti,1991; Leithwood et al., 1992; Renbarger & Davis, 2019; Schneider et al., 2017).

Education operates in a split system of the academic side and business and operation side of the district. Certificated staff on the academic side of the school district receive ongoing professional development (Leithwood, 1990; Ohio Department of Education, 2015; Ohio Revised Code, Section 124, 2016). Classified staff, however, are excluded from ongoing professional development. As a result, there are gaps in the research pertaining to the impact and performance of classified staff. Further research is suggested to learn more about ongoing professional development offerings to classified staff in K-12 settings.

All staff have a right to opportunities for growth, knowledge, and development but the responsibility to provide those opportunities falls on the leader. Teachers have access to continuous professional learning opportunities, but classified staff do not receive ongoing professional development. They too need access to continuous professional development opportunities. Learning measures skills in moments, but development measures skill over time.

A transformational leader with a growth mindset must put systems in place to develop staff, create a transformative culture, and build district capacity. Providing professional development programming is necessary for adult learning success, district transformation, and

student achievement. According to Duff (2019), “adults will place more stake in the appreciation for the learning process if there is a clear understanding of why learning should take place” (p. 52). One way to accomplish this is by ensuring that all staff have access to continuous professional development.

# CHAPTER III

# METHODOLOGY

According to Antinluoma et al. (2018), professional learning communities and professional growth in education are centered on teachers. Others in the district, however, work to foster an atmosphere where children can succeed (Adejar et al., 2020; Admiraal et al., 2021; Turner, 2002). Classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations contribute to the development of favorable conditions for learning (Turner, 2002). For instance, secretaries communicate with staff, students, parents, and the community, while safety and security ensure that students are learning in a secure setting. Transportation personnel remove barriers that impacts a student's presence in the learning environment.

Loeb (2016) argued the best resource for students is adults. Adults in an educational setting are not exclusive to teachers. The importance of non-teaching personnel is equal to that of academic leaders like principals and educators (Loeb, 2016; Turner, 2002; Vishwaroop, 2022). The target population for the proposed study is classified (non-certificated and non-instructional) and business and operations staff in K-12 school systems. Non-teaching staff who work in school systems but not directly with students are an integral part of student and district success (Vishwaroop, 2022).

All staff have a right to opportunities to grow, develop, and gain knowledge; and department, school, and district leaders are responsible to provide those opportunities (Admiraal et al., 2019; Turner, 2002). The success of the growth, development, and knowledge of staff is contingent on leadership's support (Admiraal et al., 2021; Swanson et al., 2020). Yet little is known about the role of classified staff in this process. Additionally, there are studies on

leadership development (Stewart, 2017; Westfahl & Wilkins, 2017), but few studies exist on the role of leadership in providing professional development opportunities to the entire workforce.

Mlakar (2019) made a connection between professional development and the improvement of school climate: “Professional development programming improved weak areas that affect the overall climate of a school or district” (p. 30). Antinluoma et al. (2018) named school culture and leadership (e.g., the principal or building leader) as the top two critical characteristics of a school and stated that the role of the leader was key in supporting the workplace climate and providing professional learning activities. There is a gap in the literature regarding the processes for providing professional development opportunities to classified staff in K-12 school systems.

A qualitative grounded theory approach was used in this research project, which allowed for the creation of a framework for providing professional development to non-instructional staff in a K-12 school system. Data analysis informed by grounded theory explained the phenomenon of providing continuous professional development to the business and operations staff in a K-12 school system (Ho & Limpaecher, 2021). Grounded theory is an explanation of observable patterns of qualitative research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This is the ideal approach to understanding the impact of continuous professional development and contributing to the limited research on best practices for providing ongoing professional development for business and operation staff.

The purpose of this study was to utilize qualitative grounded theory in methods to create a framework for providing professional development to non-instructional staff in a K-12 school system. There is little research that addresses best practices in providing professional development opportunities for business and operations staff members. While several research

approaches could be utilized, this study is best suited for a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory allows for patterns and themes to occur from the data rather than conducting a study with preconceived assumptions. Additionally, it honors the agency of the research participants and positions them as the ones most knowledgeable of their experiences and potential solutions as it relates to professional development.

A random sampling of classified and business and operations staff was utilized. Data collection consisted of a survey with classified staff and business and operations staff. A focus group interview was conducted with leaders in business and operations. Data analysis occurred repeatedly during the data collection phase to allow for the emergence of preliminary themes. This chapter includes the following sections: research method, research questions, the role of the researcher, participant sampling, survey and focus group, data collection, the study sample, data analysis validity, and ethical considerations.

## Research Method

A grounded theory in qualitative research helped to create a best practices framework for providing professional development to non-instructional staff in a K-12 school system. According to Creamer (2018), using multiple types of data requires using multiple types of analysis. In this study, surveying classified and business and operations staff and conducting a focus group interview with leaders captured more voices and helped make connections between staff perceptions of continuous professional development and the leaders' role in providing professional development opportunities for non-instructional staff.

Through grounded theory methods, researchers identify a phenomenon and contextualize the influences of the experience (Charmaz, 2014; Creamer, 2018). This was an appropriate method to explain the phenomenon of best practices in providing professional development to

the business and operations staff in a K-12 school system (Ho & Limpaecher, 2021). Participants in the focus group and survey respondents described observable patterns through grounded theory methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Charmaz (2014) offered that in grounded theory, the researcher shapes and derives the theory by purposeful interaction with data. This is the ideal approach to understand the impact of continuous professional development, the leader's role to provide professional development opportunities, and contribute to the limited research on professional development for business and operation staff.

Grounded theory helps identify similarities in experiences that eventually lead to themes and future theories (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The researcher created the frameworks due to the limited research that addresses best practices in providing professional development opportunities for the growth of business and operations staff members. The researcher believed that conducting a qualitative study was the best approach to establishing a framework for providing continuous professional development. According to Rudestam and Newton (2015), "Qualitative studies are likely to produce large quantities of data that represent words and ideas rather than numbers and statistics" (p. 209). It was determined that a qualitative study was the best way to capture data from multiple voices and different workplace demographics (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). In guiding the data collection process, the use of theoretical sampling and the constant comparative method of data analysis was the most effective way to identify patterns in the data and to arrange the data in relationship to each other to build a grounded theory (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Theoretical sampling is collecting, coding, and analyzing data as it emerges (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The constant comparative method is comparing data to find patterns of similarities and differences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The most effective methods for gathering the best information to answer the research questions were the survey, focus group interview, and document review. Data were collected in phases to access information from multiple resources (Rudestam & Newtown, 2015). The survey phase included a random sampling of classified and business and operations staff. The purpose of surveys is to methodically outline the details and traits of a particular phenomenon or the connections between phenomena and events (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualtrics was the confidential survey platform used to capture data from a large number of classified and non-instructional staff members. No personal identifying information (names, email, age) was collected from respondents. During the survey process, respondents first consented to the terms of the survey and completed four sections of predetermined questions or statements pertaining to their professional development experience. The intention of this survey was to gather the perspectives on professional development from a large group of classified and non-instructional staff. Using this tool, the researcher expected to learn PD experiences and opportunities for classified and non-instructional staff. After the analysis, the researcher expected to discover what gaps existed in continuous professional development.

Other phases in this qualitative research included a focus group interview with six leaders in business and operations and the analysis of documents. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined a focus group as "an interview on a topic with a group of people who have knowledge of the topic" (p. 114). A focus group interview is held in a group setting which differs from the input of a survey and an interview with an individual (Merriam & Tisdell). During the focus group interview process, participants consented to the terms of the interview and completed a demographic questionnaire prior to the scheduled interview. They also provided their gender and an age range; however, for anonymity, participants used a one-to-two-word alias of their choice

that described themselves or their leadership style. The intention of the focus group interview was to gain an understanding of the leaders' role in providing professional development opportunities for classified and non-instructional staff. The document review was used to give the researcher more insight on what types and consistencies of professional development opportunities leaders were providing their staff. From the focus group interview and document review, the researcher expected to learn the leaders' perspective on professional development and what PD opportunities they were providing their staff. After the analysis of the data from the focus group and document review, the researcher expected to learn from leaders their willingness and ability to provide consistent PD opportunities and identify existing PD offerings.

## Research Questions

Previous research formed the development of the primary research question based on the study's focus on providing professional development to staff members who work on the business and operations side of a school district. As described in Chapter 2, the theoretical framework that drove the design of the current study were andragogy, experiential learning, and transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978; Knowles, 1978; Kolb & Plovnick, 1974). These theories are important in developing a best practices framework that is meaningful to adult learners and leaders. The primary and secondary questions were created to uncover the best practices in providing professional development to non-instructional staff in an urban school system. The study addressed the following questions:

Overall RQ: What were the best practices for providing professional development for business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district?

RQ 1: How do the business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district describe their professional development needs and experiences?

RQ2: How do the business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district describe how professional development impact their personal and professional growth?

RQ3: How do business and operations leaders in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district describe their best practices in providing professional development to business and operations staff?

a. What are the perceived benefits of implementing an ongoing professional development framework for business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district?
b. What are the perceived barriers or challenges in implementing an ongoing professional development framework for business and operations staff in a large, urban, Midwestern K-12 school district?
c. In what ways does providing an ongoing professional development framework for business and operations staff in a large, urban, Midwestern K-12 school district affect the organizational culture?

The significance of this study was that it would add to the body of knowledge, fill gaps related to professional development for classified staff, identify the leader's role in providing professional development opportunities, make recommendations on what would engage this group of employees, and help leaders address the overall value to the mission and vision of the district. It is vital that leaders create a culture of learning and ongoing development in business and operations to model growth and learning in the district for students and the community. Providing continuous professional development to classified staff can also transform workplace

cultures by shifting from a fixed mindset to encouraging a growth mindset in employees and a school district (Berkowitz, 2017; Braithwaite et al., 2017; Dweck, 1999; Mlakar, 2019).

## Role of the Researcher

In my role in a school system, I exercise my passion for providing ongoing professional development for the business and operations. Throughout my career, I have experienced being a support staff member and a leader in providing professional development opportunities to support staff. This has allowed me to view this subject from both sides.

Through my personal experiences of not receiving professional development as a support staff member and experiencing minimal professional development opportunities as a school district leader, I have found that the concept of professional development is skewed. In education, professional development is often prioritized for leaders in the academic areas, while classified and non-instructional staff development needs are often not considered. Unfortunately, professional development for non-instructional staff has too often been misused as a punitive measure or corrective action. The discipline "emphasize punishment over developing positive behaviors" (Weingarten, 2015, p. 1). In other words, professional development is considered or experienced as a corrective action to decrease a behavior rather than seen as growth opportunity. An example is a leader assigning a one-time conflict resolution training to correct an escalated behavior without any follow-up.

I am interested in understanding this phenomenon from other perspectives and curious to see if access to professional development is more readily available to support staff in the two large, urban Midwestern K-12 school districts. I am curious to understand how leaders provide ongoing professional development opportunities geared toward staff growth and capacity building. I want to uncover the assumptions, beliefs, and values of the business and operations

professionals. I also want to recognize my personal biases and assumptions based on my experiences with professional development.

My role, as the researcher in this study, was to gather data through a survey sent to the two large, urban Midwestern K-12 school districts to gain the perspective of as many non-teaching support staff members as possible. The larger sample expanded the scope for building a best practice framework for providing ongoing professional development, allowing the researcher to capture more rich data than through a limited case study.

While reviewing the survey findings and identifying themes within the data that were common among the participants, a focus group interview was conducted with six leaders in business and operations. The purpose of the focus group interviews was to 1) gain leadership insight on professional development, 2) determine the role of leadership in providing ongoing professional development for their staff, and 3) identify best practices in providing professional development in workplace cultures.

By acknowledging in advance my own personal biases, my ultimate goal was to collect, examine, and interpret the data as objectively as possible. I also conducted my study ethically and with integrity. Despite of the identified limitations, the study developed a best practices framework for providing professional development to non-instructional staff in a school system.

## Participant Sampling

This study was designed to create a best practices framework for providing ongoing professional development to non-instructional support staff in business and operations. Developing a professional development framework for classified and non-instructional staff served as a tool for leaders in designing strategies for ongoing professional development for their

workforces. The target population for this study was classified and non-instructional support staff members and leaders in business and operations who did not work directly with students.

This study was purposeful in focusing on classified staff members who helped create environments for student learning and achievement. An effort to improve all employees through professional development is important because each employee individually contributes to the success of the school district (Turner, 2002).

**School Districts**

Although the two large, urban school districts in the Midwest ran a post-pandemic pilot of providing continuous professional development to non-instructional staff, it was important to expand perspectives by collecting rich data from other large, urban districts to develop a best practices framework. It was determined that collecting data from two large, urban school districts in the Midwest would be most appropriate for creating a professional development framework for business and operations staff. District 1 and District 2 were selected based on being large, urban public K-12 districts, respectively, in the Midwest.

**Table 1**

*Two Large, Urban School Districts*

| | *District 1* | *District 2* |
|---|---|---|
| Established | Mid 1800s | Mid 1800s |
| Sq. Miles | 110+ | 70+ |
| Location | Midwest | Midwest |
| No. of School Buildings | 110+ | 100+ |
| Enrollment | 45,000+ | 24,000+ |

*Note:* Enrollment and No. of schools were taken from the State School Report Card (n.d.). All other information was taken from district websites.

**Survey**

Data collected from a survey questionnaire were used to represent a larger population (Bartlett et al., 2001). Survey information is generalized findings from a sample back to a population (Bartlett et al., 2001; Cochran, 1977). The researcher used a survey to gather descriptive statistics and their patterns of behavior from participants (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Rudestam and Newton (2015) stated,"After describing the sample, you need to provide adequate statistics to support the analyses that follow" (p. 139). Bartlett et al. (2001) wrote a manuscript to "describe common procedures for determining sample size for simple random and systematic random samples" (p. 44). According to Cochran (1977), the margin of error is vital to the survey. Bartlett et al. (2001) surmised that determining the sample size is a task. The response rate may be larger with a captive audience but may fall under 100% with a smaller response rate (Bartlett et al., 2001; Cochran, 1977). An anonymous survey was sent to more than 2,000 classified and non-instructional staff in two large, urban Midwestern school districts via email. The survey questionnaire, using the Qualtrics platform to collect data, included informed consent, four sections with not more than 10 questions, and ended with reCaptcha to authenticate each submission. The minimum sample size for this study was 100 to maintain a meaningful result.

The Internet survey was distributed to classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations in three large, urban, Midwestern K-12 school districts. This method was designed to capture the perspectives of a large sample. "Determining the appropriate number of participants for a given design is one of the most difficult sampling problems" (Rudestam & Newton, 2015, pp. 104-105). The survey allowed for an appropriate effect size and provided a proper number of participant data from which to draw meaningful conclusions (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The goal of the survey was to gather information about professional

development from a large number of classified staff. Choosing a survey appropriate for this study was intentional. In a time when people were inundated with emails, online training requirements, and district surveys, the researcher understood the possibility of participant burnout. For this reason, it was important to provide a survey that was short yet captured enough information as possible. Rudestam and Newton (2015) warned against designing or building a new instrument, suggesting instead the researcher locate an existing measure. The existing Likert Scale and Stapel Scale were instruments used in the survey for this study. The Likert Scale is an interval categorical ranking scale that includes a mid-point; conversely, the Stapel Scale is an interval numeric ranking scale without a neutral point (Verma, 2019; Yusoff, 2019). Each scale was selected to measure qualitative variables in terms of categories and numbers to quantify respondents' opinions (Verma, 2019; Yusoff, 2019). Survey results helped the researcher develop interview questions for leaders who engaged in the focus group interview.

**Survey Instrument Structure**

To capture the essence of this study, the survey instrument was divided into four sections that included no more than 10 questions per section.

**Section One.** The first section served as a participant role identifier for classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations. It included multiple choice to choose their job description, tenure, role in the district, and level of training:

- Your role/department in the district
    - Buildings and Grounds (maintenance)
    - Capital Improvements
    - Communications
    - Custodial Services
    - Equity
    - Food Nutrition/Service
    - Human Resources
    - Information Technology (IT)
    - Purchasing

    - Safety and Security
    - Secretary
    - Transportation
    - Wellness
    - Other

- How long have you worked in your district?
    - Under 1 year – 4 years
    - 5 years – 9 years
    - 10 years – 14 years
    - 15 years – 19 years
    - 20 years – 24 years
    - Over 25 years

- How long have you been in your current role?
    - Under 1 year – 4 years
    - 5 years – 9 years
    - 10 years – 14 years
    - 15 years – 19 years
    - 20 years – 24 years
    - Over 25 years

- Have you worked in any other classified or business and operations role in the district?
    - Yes
    - No

- Your level(s) of training
    - Certificate or Licensure
    - Degree
    - Departmental (job-specific) Training
    - Ongoing refresher training
    - Orientation
    - Professional Development days
    - Union training

**Section Two.** The second section employed the use of a Likert scale to measure the subjects' current experiences with professional development. The scale range included Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree.

- As it pertains to professional development…
    - My district offers enough training to keep my growth and skill up to date
    - My direct manager enables me to learn and develop new skills

    - My leader encourages professional development for growth in my department
    - In the last month, I have had opportunities to learn and grow
    - I feel that I am growing professionally
    - My leader is responsible for providing professional development opportunities throughout the school year
    - Professional Development is provided ongoing or continuously in my department
    - Professional Development is provided as a means of *punishment* in my department
    - Professional Development is provided as a means of *growth* in my department
    - Professional Development helps to improve workplace culture in my department

**Section Three.** The third section used a Stapel scale measuring tool to capture the participants' insights or experiences with professional development ranging from Very Poor at -2, Poor at -1, Good at +1 to Very Good at +2. The researcher asked respondents to rate the following experience with professional development topics and the effort of their direct leadership and above leadership to provide professional development opportunities:

- Rate the following experiences pertaining to professional development
    - Leadership's efforts in providing professional development or growth opportunities
    - Professional Development offerings available to staff
    - Leadership's support in my personal and professional growth and development
    - My overall experiences with professional development
    - My attitudes about mandatory professional development

- Challenges or barriers to participating in professional development (check all that apply)

    - Time
    - Leader Mindset
    - Cost
    - Work hours
    - Platform (in-person or virtual)
    - Other

- Your learning style
    - Auditory (listening/speaking, lectures/videos)

    - Interpersonal (group learning)
    - Intrapersonal (independent learning)
    - Kinesthetic (by doing)
    - Linguistic (reading/note-taking)
    - Logical (steps/methods)
    - Visual (pictures/examples)

- Ideal training platform
    - In-person (workshop, lecture) only
    - Virtual (virtual platforms, webinars) only
    - In-person and Virtual

**Section Four.** The fourth and final section provided two grid lists of professional development offerings.

The first list asked respondents to check all of the training that they had received at work.

- Training you received at work
    - Communication
    - Conflict Resolution
    - Customer Service
    - De-escalation
    - Diversity, Equity, Inclusion
    - Job-specific
    - Leadership
    - Managing Change
    - Problem-Solving
    - Social Emotional Learning (SEL)
    - Stress Management
    - Team Building (Bonding)
    - Time Management
    - Other

The second list was identical to the first but asked respondents to check all of the training they would like to receive at work.

- Training you would like to have
    - Communication
    - Conflict Resolution
    - Customer Service
    - De-escalation
    - Diversity, Equity, Inclusion
    - Job-specific
    - Leadership
    - Managing Change

- Problem-Solving
- Social Emotional Learning (SEL)
- Stress Management
- Team Building (Bonding)
- Time Management
- Other

Participants were asked to add the type and amount of hard skills (job-related) they had received at work or N/A if nothing to add. This was in a short-answer format.

Participants were asked how often they felt hard-skill (job-related) training should be offered throughout the school year.

- Hard skill (job-related) training should be offered ____throughout the school year
  - 1-2 times
  - 3-4 times
  - 5-6 times
  - 7-8 times
  - 9-10 times
  - More than 10 times

Participants were asked to add the type and amount of soft skills (how to work with and interact with others) they had received at work or N/A if nothing to add. This was in a short-answer format.

Participants were asked how often they felt soft-skill (how to work with and interact with others) training should be offered throughout the school year.

- Soft-skill (how to work with and interact with others) training should be offered _____ throughout the school year
  - 1-2 times
  - 3-4 times
  - 5-6 times
  - 7-8 times
  - 9-10 times
  - More than 10 times

Participants were given an opportunity to add comments for responses marked as "other" or N/A if nothing to add. They were discouraged from adding any personal identifiers such as their name, age, or district. This was in a short-answer format.

**Survey Conclusion Verbiage.** The following privacy verbiage was added to the final section of the survey:

> "To maintain privacy, I did not include any personal identifiers such as my name, age, or district in any open fields."

To submit the survey, respondents were required to check the Captcha verification box below the following text:

> "By submitting your survey, you are consenting to participate in the study.

Participants received the following message upon submission,

> "Thank you for participating in this survey study to develop a best practice framework for professional development for classified and business and operations staff in K-12 settings. Your input is appreciated!"

**Survey Population.** The randomly selected population included classified and non-teaching staff in business and operations. Staff emails were provided by the two large, urban Midwestern school districts. According to Rudestam and Newton (2015), "Random selection of subjects permits the researcher to generalize the results of the study from the sample to the population in question" (p. 31). Since instructional assistants (paraprofessional) staff are often included or studied alongside teachers, they were not listed in the dropdown of occupations and were not the focus of this study. The goal of this study was to capture data and gain perspectives from classified and non-classroom employees who were excluded from the literature relating to

growth through professional development. However, instructional assistants were marked as "other" and represented a large portion of the survey responses.

The target population was chosen with the intent of seeking individual perspectives from urban Midwestern K-12 school districts. Data were collected from the two large, urban K-12 school districts in the Midwest. The minimum sample size for this study was 100 to maintain a meaningful result.

**Focus Group**

The study also included a focus group interview with six leaders in business and operations. Phase two of the study was to conduct a focus group interview with six leaders in business and operations. This was an opportunity to obtain qualitative data from a random selection of individual leaders. The focus group was facilitated virtually to discuss the leader's perception of providing professional development to classified (non-instructional) staff in business and operations. It was important to determine their perspective surrounding professional development and their mindset on providing continuous or ongoing professional development for their staff. Discussion about the leader's responsibility to provide professional development opportunities to their staff was also facilitated, with emphasis on desired professional development outcomes and what they deemed a necessary component in creating a best practice framework for ongoing professional development offerings.

The focus group comprised of six business and operations leaders across two large urban Midwestern K-12 school districts selected to participate in this study. According to Rudestam & Newton (2015), purposeful sampling involves choosing participants who can contribute information relevant to the research study. A selection of six leaders was chosen to contribute relevant information about a leader's role in providing professional development opportunities to their staff. Participant selection criteria included supervisors, managers, and director-level

leadership on the business and operations side of their school districts who, as part of their roles, evaluate classified and non-instructional staff. The evaluations measured staff performance and informed the leader of the strengths, weaknesses, and overall needs of their staff members (Turner, 2002). My hope was that the six leaders would fully participate in the focus group conversation, as they would be able to discuss their staff needs and performance in more detail than the limiting information provided in an informal survey.

**Focus Group Interview.** Questions for the focus group interview were drafted based on the research question and sub-questions. Six operational leaders were provided a demographic questionnaire and were asked qualifying questions to make sure they were leaders in one of the two large, urban districts and to state their current titles. The questionnaire also collected information regarding the leaders' alias, tenure, age, gender, highest degree, certifications or licenses, and types of professional development they had experienced. The focus group interview was conducted using the Zoom virtual platform. By signing the informed consent, focus group leaders allowed the meeting to be audio and video recorded. This gave the researcher the ability to fully engage in the focus group discussion while jotting notes throughout. The interview questions were as follows:

- What is the purpose of providing professional development for classified and business and operations staff?
- As a leader, what professional development topics do you believe are important to classified staff success?
- Which professional development platform do you prefer for classified staff: in-person only, virtual only, or both?
- What is the role of a leader in providing professional development offerings to classified staff in business and operations?

- In what ways does providing ongoing professional development to classified staff affect the workplace culture? How do classified staff contribute to the culture of learning in schools?

- Professional development is often calendared for academic departments but not for business and operations. What are some barriers, challenges, or limitations to providing ongoing professional development for classified and business and operations staff?

- How does providing professional development opportunities for classified and non-instructional staff influence student learning and achievement?

- What do you believe are the best practices for providing professional development for classified staff? What should a professional development framework include or consider?

A focus group discussion about a professional development framework and the use of aliases allowed leaders to freely share what they believe were essential elements in creating a best practices framework for providing ongoing professional development for classified staff in business and operations throughout the school year. According to Turner (2002), "It is assumed that the combined expertise of these [leaders] would be adequate in determining the practical feasibility of the proposed [framework]" (p. 89). At the conclusion of the interview, the researcher downloaded the audio and visual from Zoom and printed the transcription.

**Member-checking.** The final phase of the focus group interview was designed to increase the internal validity and reliability of the study by confirming or correcting the researcher's findings of the focus group interview. This was done through a process known as member-checking or respondent validation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A copy of each indexed transcript was sent to leaders individually to provide them the opportunity to clarify or elaborate on their previous statements.

**Document Review.** Operational leaders were asked to send documents related to an existing professional development plan, professional development calendars, a list of barriers or

limitations, or other artifacts after the focus group session. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated, "The specific purpose for generating documents is to learn more about the situation, person, or event being investigated" (p. 174). These documents provided a good source of data to strengthen validity and reliability (Merriam & Tisdell).

**Data Storage.** Data collection methods varied based on participants. The tool used to collect survey data was Qualtrics sent via email. The tool used to collect focus group data was Zoom, and documents were collected for review via email. Survey and focus group participants were not identified by name in any reports or publications. Survey participants were advised not to include identifying information such as their name or district. Focus group interviewees provided an alias of their choice and were asked not to disclose their district on a demographic questionnaire. Their confidentiality was protected during this study and all data gathered were subject to standard data use policies of being stored in a file that is only accessible to the researcher and then destroyed after three (3) years. Only the researcher will have access to the data gathered during this study. Any inadvertent identifiers were redacted using an inked ID Gard. While an age range and gender were requested from leaders, no other personal information was kept on file. All data collected were used solely for this research study.

## Professional Development Sample Topics

In developing a best practice framework for providing professional development, it is important to understand that each department has its own job-embedded or hard-skill training that is necessary to be proficient in doing the work. Job-embedded or technical training is relevant to professional development and must be included as part of the professional development framework. It is equally important to provide training that complements the hard skills with soft skills. To explain, I use the analogy of the hammer.

There should be required training to use the hammer effectively in job performance. When used correctly, the hammer is a great tool for the nail. However, an employee armed with this hard skill but lacking the human or soft skill of communication, de-escalation, or conflict resolution has turned the proverbial hammer into a weapon. For this reason, professional development offerings must also include soft-skill development to increase the personal capacity of the employee. Sample topics are as follows:

- conflict resolution
    - customer service (internal and external)
    - de-escalation
    - diversity, equity, inclusion
    - improving communication skills
    - leadership
    - managing change/change management
    - problem-solving
    - social-emotional learning (SEL)
    - stress management
    - team building (bonding)
    - time management

Each of these topics aid employees in working with other human beings. While this is not an exhaustive list, the absence of these skills, based on the above example, will have a negative effect on workplace culture and human interaction.

## Data Analysis

The goal of grounded theory data analysis was to derive meaning from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The primary focus of this type of study was to see what theory emerges from the data. In other words, unlike traditional qualitative research, grounded theory is theory development. Data were analyzed by comparing the various parts of the research results to find similarities and differences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Themes and patterns emerged, based on the research questions, and were coded and synthesized (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rudestam & Newton, 2015).

Responses for the survey questionnaire for classified staff tapered as the interview for the focus group of leaders in business and operation were conducted. After the focus group interview, member-checking was completed, and documents were reviewed. The researcher then coded the data to look for frequent themes. The process of analyzing data was flexible to allow new themes and categories to emerge or change throughout the course of the research.

Data were analyzed using open and axial coding. Axial coding is a method used to distinguish relationships amid open codes by color-coding data (Charmaz, 2014). This was an appropriate way to link the emerging data in this study. The researcher remained open to uncovering data throughout the focus group interview process and used open coding to label and organize qualitative data (Merriam, 2009). Charmaz (2014) offered that this coding technique allows the researcher to pull from the data.

The first step was to take copious notes during the focus group interview. Although the interviews were both video and audio recorded, the recording was unable to capture the environment, mood, facial expressions, or emotions while a participant was not speaking. These notes assisted the researcher with seeing the big picture and context during the discussion. The second step of the process of data analysis was to transcribe the interview. Here, the researcher obtained a written reenactment of the discussion from the audio and video transcripts downloaded from Zoom. The researcher then provided each of the six leaders with an indexed transcription for member-checking, giving each leader an opportunity to correct or clarify what was stated in the interview. This was done to increase the validity and reliability of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The next step in the data analysis process was to organize the categories and patterns that emerged from the data. This was done by labeling the emerging

category with an assigned color, giving it meaning, and providing a brief example of how the term or phrase was used during the interview.

The researcher first prepared the data using open coding to analyze the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Next, the researcher color-coded each of the questions on the original transcripts to distinguish each response, then created separate transcripts specific to each leader that included their responses to the subsequent interview questions. After reading and re-reading the data from the survey results and focus group interview through selective coding, the researcher tested the themes that emerged using a constant comparative process (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The researcher's field notes were instrumental in determining how the axial coding aligned with the interview questions (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). In comparing the colors across the notes for each question and participant, the researcher was able to move the categories to themes pertinent to the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Themes shared by all of the survey respondents and focus group participants were considered common and the researcher also noted themes shared by four out of six leaders.

The researcher asked participants to provide a professional development calendar, a professional development plan, or a list of barriers preventing the leader from providing professional development to their staff. Information collected from the document review and themes were compared. The themes and professional development documents provided by the leaders were used to develop a grounded theory for a best practices framework for providing ongoing professional development for classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations.

## Validity/Limitations

A methodological triangulation was used to validate the study's findings. It is not feasible for researchers to capture an objective "truth" or "reality"; however, there are many strategies to help increase "credibility" and reliability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The theories of Andragogy or Adult Learning, Transformational Leadership, and Workplace Culture were triangulated around their combined effect on providing professional development for classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations. The use of a qualitative research methods also contributed to methodological triangulation. In this study, a survey questionnaire, a focus group interview, and a document review were conducted for internal validity, external validity, and reliability.

### Evidence of Internal Validity

To increase validity, a survey was provided for completion by classified and non-instructional staff, and a focus group interview session was conducted. The purpose of the survey was to collect data from a large group of classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations. The purpose of conducting a focus group interview session was to understand the leader's role in providing professional development and receive input on developing a best practice professional development framework for classified staff in business and operations. The document review further validated the study by removing the researcher as the sole reviewer of the research results and allowing participants to confirm or correct the results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### Evidence of Reliability

Because human behavior is not fixed, reliability is useful in revealing and explaining consistency, causal relationships among variables, and if the result can be relied on (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Steps in this research were taken to ensure the study could be repeated. While a replicated study does not guarantee the same result, this does not discredit the result of this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "The more important question for qualitative research is *whether the results are consistent with the data collected*" (p. 251). Providing a survey questionnaire and conducting a focus group interview yielded reliable results for this study and validated its findings.

**Limitations**

There were limitations to this research study. A survey questionnaire was sent to the classified staff in business and operations in two large, urban, K-12 school districts in the Midwest; however, only a small number of classified and non-instructional staff participated in the study. In addition, a small sample of leaders in business and operations in two large districts was used to represent a larger population. Although while acknowledging my own personal biases, my ultimate goal was to collect, examine, and interpret the data as objectively as possible. In spite of the identified limitations, the findings of this study will contribute to a best practice framework of providing professional development to classified and non-instructional support staff members that will help district leaders design ongoing professional development for their classified and non-instructional staff.

## Ethical Considerations

Human beings were the subject of my study and it was my obligation as a researcher to protect the well-being of my human subjects. The researcher's "primary responsibility is always to act in an ethical manner" (Rudestam & Newton, 2015, p. 313). The integrity of the study hinges on being honest and transparent about my biases as a researcher. In this study, various

protocols were put in place to combat the many limitations and ethical dilemmas that could occur during the research process.

The first step to prevent negative outcomes for participants was to submit a request to obtain approval to proceed with the study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). After receiving IRB approval, I was also required to submit a request to obtain approval to proceed with the study from each school district's Research Review Board (RRB). I then sought to obtain informed consent from adult employees over the age of 18 for the survey and focus group interview. With this population, parental or legal guardian consent was not necessary or required (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The second step was to identify any potential negative personal or professional consequences that may result if the identities of the human subjects were revealed. For example, backlash from management or co-workers could potentially result if the identities of survey participants were revealed.

In the case of the survey, a statement of informed consent was included in the email inviting individuals to complete the survey. This verbiage was also provided in the introductory portion of the research survey. The feature of collecting email addresses was disabled (turned off) and no section asked for or required individuals to include their names. A notation was made to discourage subjects from including their names or other identifying attributes in the section of the survey where they could freely add additional comments or suggestions.

A second method of data collection in this study was the use of a focus group (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, a group of leaders was interviewed about the topic and their role in providing professional development opportunities to support staff. As with the survey, the leaders were also provided with a statement of informed consent in the email inviting them to participate in the focus group. The verbiage was reiterated verbally at the start of each focused

group session and also in writing for each participant to sign. A reminder was given throughout the session to reinforce anonymity. I was intentional about not sharing my opinions or professional development experience unless it was used as a method to dive deeper into the conversation. For example, I used random feedback from previous professional development experience to pose a question to continue the conversation or to give leaders talking points about the subject of providing professional development opportunities to their support staff in business and operation.

## Summary

This chapter described the study's purpose and research questions that centered on providing professional development for classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations and the role operational leadership plays in providing professional development opportunities to their staff. A grounded theory study was the best research approach in terms of developing a framework for providing continuous professional development in business and operations in an urban, Midwestern K-12 school district. The chapter described the researcher's role, the sample (participants and settings), and detailed the procedures used to collect and analyze data to make sure it was valid, reliable, and replicable. Triangulation, member-checking, and discussion of the researcher's limitations of the study ensured credibility and trustworthiness. Finally, the chapter concluded with ethical considerations and the safeguards put in place to minimize risks, protect human subjects, and show the researcher's transparency.

# CHAPTER IV

# RESULTS

The objective of this study was to create a best practices framework for providing professional development to classified and non-instructional business and operations staff in large urban school districts utilizing a grounded theory approach. According to Charmaz and Thornberg (2021), "Grounded theory is a systematic method of conducting research that shapes collecting data and provides explicit strategies for analyzing them" (p. 305). The use of the grounded theory method allowed the researcher to construct the theory based on what emerged from interacting with the data and learning from participants rather than constructing data from existing theories (Charmaz & Thornberg). This grounded theory case study intended to address the absence of a professional development framework for business and operations staff.

The purpose of the study was to establish a data-based best-practices professional development framework for business and operations staff in a large, urban school district. What were the best practices for providing professional development for business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district? Data from this study were gathered for the purpose of answering the following research questions and sub-questions:

1. How do the business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district describe their ongoing professional development needs and experiences?
2. How do the business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district describe how ongoing professional development affects their personal and professional growth?

3. How do business and operations leaders in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district describe their best practices in providing professional development to business and operations staff?
    a. What are the perceived benefits of implementing an ongoing professional development framework for business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district?
    b. What are the perceived barriers or challenges in implementing an ongoing professional development framework for business and operations staff in a large, urban, Midwestern K-12 school district?
    c. In what ways does providing an ongoing professional development framework for business and operations staff in a large, urban, Midwestern K-12 school district affect the organizational culture?

This chapter analyzed the perceptions of classified and non-instructional staff and leaders in business and operations from two large, urban Midwestern K-12 school districts. Classified and non-instructional staff shared their thoughts by completing a survey questionnaire. Operational leaders shared their perspectives in a 60-minute semi-structured focus group interview. Both staff and leaders responded to questions about the current state of professional development for staff in operations and their desired states regarding professional development opportunities and offerings.

The sections in this chapter include information about the data collection processes, how data were gathered and recorded, and the processes used for data analysis. The first section describes the processes of gathering data from the survey sample through the attainment of saturation. The next section describes engagement with six leaders during a semi-structured

focus group interview and the member-checking process. After the data were analyzed, the researcher triangulated the data to answer the research question and sub-questions. Triangulation is the process of "soliciting data from multiple and different sources as a means of cross-checking and corroborating evidence and illuminating a theme" (Rudestam & Newton, 2015, p. 134). Descriptions of the themes that emerged from the data are also included in this chapter.

## Data Analysis

This research used thematic analysis and grounded theory processes. According to Merriam and Grenier (2019), "Whereas thematic analysis seeks to find out patterns and unifying themes in the data, grounded theory takes a few steps further" (p. 213). Grounded theory builds concepts "useful for addressing questions about process; that is, how something changes over time (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). According to Rudestam and Newton (2015), "grounded theory is inductive and the theory evolves as data are collected and explored, establishing the precise sample size beforehand may be neither possible nor advisable" (p. 124). The researcher was inundated with data to code, compare, contrast, combine, connect, and analyze. The grounded theory process helped the researcher make sense of the data through 1) open coding, 2) axial coding, 3) selective coding, and 4) constant comparative analysis (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Open coding, also known as initial coding, is the first step in the grounded theory of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The researcher's first step in open coding was to "prepare verbatim transcripts of [the] interview" (Rudestram & Newton, 2015, p. 218). The researcher became familiar with the data after reading, re-reading, and reflecting on the data from the survey, focus group participants, and the information provided in the document review (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rudestram

& Newton, 2015). The next step for coding data is axial coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The axial coding step determines how data are related (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). During this stage, the researcher grouped the open codes responses and brought meaning to the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Selective coding is the process of refinement (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). From this, emerging theories are constructed (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Here the researcher took time to ask the data a critical question, "What is going on here" (Rudestam & Newton, 2015, p. 222), to dive deeper into the meaning of what was collected. The constant comparative analysis method was utilized to define which part of the rich data to include and exclude from the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Through constant comparative analysis, the researcher revised, modified, and amended the meaning of the data. This process occurred until new units were identified and categorized appropriately up to the point when the data was considered saturated (Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Saturation is a point of redundancy whereby new information does not bring new or additional meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rudestam & Newton, 2015).

After analyzing the data, the researcher labeled or coded four consistent themes that surfaced from the survey, focus group discussion, and document reviews. These factors could contribute to the design of a best practices framework for providing professional development for classified and non-instructional staff.

## Participants

Classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations from two K-12 school districts were sent an email inviting them to participate in an anonymous survey. To balance the voices of classified and non-instructional staff, the researcher also conducted a focus group

interview with operational leaders from the same districts. These processes allowed the researcher to gain a holistic view of participants' perceptions of professional development and how it was administered. Below, the researcher presents a summary of participants, demographics, tenure, and highest-grade levels or degrees attained.

**Classified and Non-Instructional Staff**

Classified and non-instructional staff agreed via informed consent to participate in the survey for this study on developing a best practices framework for providing ongoing professional development. Survey participants were current classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations. More than 2,000 classified and non-instructional staff were solicited to take the survey. A predetermined number of 100 responses satisfied the minimum sample size for this study; 157 employees agreed to participate.

The survey began by asking participants to provide job-related demographic information. Fifty-five percent of participants were employed within the two districts for under 10 years, and 41% had been in their roles between one and four years. A total of 70% had not worked in any other roles in their districts, while 18% of the participants had completed college degrees and 21% had obtained job-related certificates or licenses.

The researcher did not initially focus the study on paraprofessionals but instead on other classified and non-instructional staff, which the researcher predefined in the survey. Categories of classified and non-instructional roles listed in the survey included wellness, buildings and grounds (maintenance), transportation, custodial services, food nutrition/service, human resources, purchasing, capital improvements, safety and security, secretary, other, information technology (IT), equity, and communications. Paraprofessionals, instructional aides, special education assistants, library assistants, interpreters, campus security, and coaches were not a

predefined category on the survey but comprised 46.04% of the "other" category collectively. Although the researcher did not initially consider the predefined categories, the information was used to interpret the data gathered from each respondent, which represented the classified and non-instructional staff's perspective.

**Business and Operations Leaders**

There were six business and operations leaders who participated in the study's focus group interviews. The goal of the focus group interviews was to determine a best practice framework for providing ongoing professional development opportunities to classified and non-instructional staff. To maintain confidentiality, each leader submitted an alias for their leadership role.

On average, the participants were employed with their districts for 18 years and an average of five years in their current roles. Four of the participants had earned college degrees and two had their high school diplomas. Two of the participants were executive leaders and four were directors. Each of the participants had worked in at least one urban school district. Although the researcher sent requests to a diverse group of department chiefs, executive directors, directors, managers, supervisors, males, and females, no managers, supervisors, or females agreed to take part in this study.

In this section, the researcher provided descriptions of each business and operations leader who participated in the focus group interview. These leaders represented a variety of backgrounds, areas of expertise, and experience. Table 1 reflects business and operations leaders' demographics per the aliases used in the study.

**Table 2**

*Leader Demographics*

| Leader Alias | # of years in current leadership role | # of years in the district | # of years in education | Gender | Age Range | Highest grade level or degree obtained |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Leader 1 | 1.5 | 2 | 9 | Male | =>50 | High School |
| Leader 2 | 9 | 20 | 20 | Male | =>50 | Undergraduate |
| Leader 3 | 1 | 32 | 43 | Male | =>60 | Graduate |
| Leader 4 | 8 | 28 | 28 | Male | =>60 | High School |
| Leader 5 | 9 | 19 | 19 | Male | =>40 | Undergraduate |
| Leader 6 | 1 | 6 | 11 | Male | =>25 | Graduate |

## Participant Profiles

In this section, the researcher provides participant-specific descriptions of each business and operations leader who participated in the focus group interview. This section provides in-depth information regarding each participant's profile. These leaders represented a variety of backgrounds, areas of expertise, and experience.

**Focus Group Adaptable-Visionary.** Adaptable-Visionary is a male executive director between the ages of 50-59. He has a high school diploma and has received several licenses and certifications from professional development training. He has been employed in urban school districts for nine years (two years with his current district, and seven years with his previous district). As a focus group participant, Adaptable-Visionary revealed that he was learning to navigate a much larger urban workforce than in his previous small rural district. He believed that professional development was necessary for the growth and strength of his department leaders and staff. He believed it "provides the tools needed to help deal with a difficult situation, should it occur."

**Focus Group Analyzer-Organizer.** Analyzer-Organizer is a male between the ages of 50-59. He has been employed in the district for 20 years but has been a department chief for nine years. He had a bachelor's of business administration (BBA) and a School Business Manager license. Analyzer-Organizer believed in the possibility of creating a best practice framework for providing ongoing professional development for leaders, classified, and operation staff to "create camaraderie and show the staff members and others that you care about them."

**Focus Group Collaborative-Empowering.** Collaborative-Empowering is a male, 60 or over. He has been an employee in the present district for 32 years but has only been a director for one year and a total of 43 years in K-12 education. Collaborative-Empowering has a doctorate in educational leadership (EdD), has been a building administrator (principal), and reported that "relationship-building" was an important component of professionally developing his teaching and classified staff.

**Focus Group Empathetic-Fair.** Empathetic-Fair is a male, 60 or over, and has a high school diploma. For eight years, he has served as a director in his present district, where he had served for the entirety of his 28-year educational career. Leader Four had a large department that was "spread all over the district." He believed that professional development helps to "shed light on industry standards."

**Focus Group Straight-Forward.** Straight-Forward is a male between the ages of 40-49. He was a director with nine years in his present position, where he had served the entirety of his 19-year educational career. He has a bachelor's degree, a specialty license, and certifications. Straight-Forward received "lots of vendor-supplied PD" and believed that one purpose of professional development was to "keep skills relevant with changes in technology and processes."

**Focus Group Supportive.** Supportive is a male between the ages of 25-39 and has been in education for 11 years. He has been in his present role as a director for one year and in the district for six years. He has a master's degree, several licenses and certifications, and had "communications training, sensitivity training, various software training, and lots of OJT (on-the-job training)." Supportive viewed professional development as "morale-building, professionalism improvement, and efficiency improvement."

The diverse backgrounds and experiences of these participants formed their perspectives on how professional development benefited their organizations. In this study, focus group leaders valued the concept of ongoing professional development. Participants believed the purpose of professional development included building relationships and morale. The all-male group shared the perspective that professional development was a tool to keep skills updated and a tool to help their staff handle difficult situations.

## Data Collection Process

The data collection process began after receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to proceed with the research study and approval from the school districts' Research Review Boards. Upon receipt of informed consent documents, the data collection methods included an anonymous survey of classified and non-instructional staff, a focus group interview with six anonymous business and operational leaders, and document reviews. Data were collected using these three methods to address the problem statement and purpose statement, in addition to answering the study's research question and sub-questions.

The researcher's initial plan was to administer the survey and analyze its results before conducting the focus group interview; however, after a delay in the approval process, the researcher shifted to a simultaneous process of collecting both survey and focus group data.

Instead of using the saturated survey results to drive the focus group discussion, the survey remained active as the researcher scheduled and facilitated the focus group interview. This proved to be the best course of action as the six focus group leaders were not swayed by the survey results and formed their own opinions about professional development offerings and opportunities, giving the researcher a chance to compare results from the survey and focus group responses. The final phase in the data collection process was to review documents requested from business and operations leaders. The documents consisted of their professional development plan, a list of professional development offerings, as well as the barriers and challenges to providing professional development opportunities to their staffs. All plans and lists were sent to the researcher via email.

**Survey Process**

The first phase of data collection included administering the survey questionnaire to classified and non-instructional staff (see Appendix C). A survey was selected because it captured voices from a large number of classified and non-instructional staff (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The process started with the researcher developing the survey using the Qualtrics survey platform. The researcher considered using a Google Form but chose Qualtrics, a secure third-party platform, to increase validity and reliability.

Data collection officially began after receipt of emails for classified and non-instructional staff to ensure the staff that the survey was safe to open and complete. An email, sent to the classified and non-instructional staff, stated that the survey was vetted and approved by the district leaders and review boards. The body of the email included the same informed consent information found in the introduction section of the survey.

The survey was broken into four sections. The first section collected demographic information: role or department in the district, tenure in current role in the district, roles in other districts, and levels of training (degree, certificate, or licensure). The second section asked participants to rate their professional development experiences using a Likert Scale of disagree, neutral, or agree. Participants were also asked to rate their professional development experiences using a Stapel Scale of very poor, poor, good, or very good. In this section, they also named predetermined challenges or barriers to participating in professional development. Section three included their learning style and their ideal training platforms (in-person or virtual). Section four, the final section, asked participants to identify which training they had received at work and which training they would like to receive. The section also included two short answer blocks that gave participants the opportunity to add hard skills and soft skills to the predetermined lists, asked how often they felt hard and soft skills trainings should be offered, and an opportunity to add a short answer response to anything marked "other" in the survey. The survey ended with a privacy statement to confirm personal identifiers were not included and a reCAPTCHA to consent to participate in the study.

**Focus Group Interview Process**

The second phase of data collection included the scheduling of a virtual focus group interview. The focus group interview process started by creating semi-structured interview questions and a demographic questionnaire (see Appendices F and G). An email was sent to leaders in business and operations in two large urban, K-12 school districts in the Midwest that included an informed consent attachment and a link to a demographic questionnaire. Unlike the survey, the focus group questionnaire was a Google Form used to collect qualifying information from participants prior to the interview, such as their title and if they were leaders in one of the

two large, urban Midwestern school districts. The questionnaire enabled the researcher to gather prior to the interview the participants' aliases, age ranges, genders, tenure durations, and highest grade or degree completed. This allowed the researcher to maximize the 60-minute semi-structured interview time by focusing the conversation on the interview questions.

Prior to the scheduled focus group interview, participants signed and dated the consent form. The researcher conducted the focus group interview during the workday. During the interview sessions, the six leaders were actively engaged in the interview and shared information about their insights on professional development. Their responses identified professional development opportunities for their staff as well as the reasons that prevented them from providing those same opportunities. The leaders did not hesitate to answer the questions and spoke about their desire to provide staff with meaningful professional development opportunities.

Following the semi-structured interview process, the researcher allowed leaders to speak freely to make the interview conversational. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "Less-structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways" (p. 110). The researcher asked follow-up questions to probe deeper into the leader's responses, to ask for clarification on vague responses, or to give others an opportunity to chime in (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The researcher created an inclusive virtual environment where participants felt safe to respond without restriction to eight interview questions. The researcher was prepared to ask 10 questions; however, the conversation created the ability to merge two sets of questions. While participants answered the interview questions, their responses crossed over many different topics. The researcher did not interrupt the flow of the conversation and allowed the participants to generate new insights. This method yielded robust information for this study.

At the end of the 60-minute interview, the researcher thanked the leaders for participating in the study, and they returned thanks to the researcher for conducting this specific study. Participants were informed to expect their indexed transcript for member-checking, meaning they would each receive their comments from the interview to confirm or clarify their statements. Member-checking is the process of giving participants the opportunity to review their portion of the conversation and make additional adjustments by adding or correcting the transcripts to truly reflect their intended message (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). This increased the study's internal validity, helping to ensure that the research accurately represented the actual insights of the focus group leaders (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), this strategy is also called respondent validation, an important way to avoid misinterpreting the participants' perspectives. Leaders were reassured that their names would not be included in the study, their identities would remain anonymous, and they would be quoted through their chosen alias. They were reminded that as per their informed consent and Youngstown State University policy, their information would be stored for three years, after which the information would be destroyed. They were also thanked in advance for submitting their documents to be reviewed.

The interview was recorded using Zoom and saved to the researcher's password-protected email account. An initial transcription was downloaded the same day. Data were reviewed by watching and listening to the recording and reading through the transcript as the researcher jotted notes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). On the day of the interview, the researcher color-coded the transcription of each question and created a transcription for each of the individual participants by their alias. Two days later, the researcher corrected the master transcript that included the complete discussion while reviewing the Zoom recording. Once the

adjustments were made to correct any typos and remove redundant wording, the researcher updated the individual transcripts. Immediately after updating the transcripts, the researcher emailed the individual transcripts to the respective leaders for member-checking. Along with the transcript, included in the email was a final request for a professional development calendar, a list of professional development, or barriers that prevented leaders from providing professional development opportunities to their staff.

**Document Reviews**

The final phase of data collection included document reviews (see Appendix H). After each focus group interview, the researcher asked participants to provide either lists or calendars detailing the professional development opportunities offered by leaders to their staff or to present a summary outlining the obstacles hindering them from facilitating such professional development opportunities. Five of the six leaders submitted documents that provided an idea of when and how classified staff in business and operations were developed. By comparing the document reviews to the survey results and the focus group interview, the documents provided a better understanding of the leader's role in providing ongoing professional development opportunities to their staff and the type of professional development offered.

**Overall Question: What are best practices for providing professional development for classified and non-instructional staff in an urban Midwestern k-12 school district?**

Table 3 shows the connections between the three data sources, the research questions, and sub-questions. This triangulation table shows the correlation between data sources and the research question and sub-questions.

**Table 3**

*Triangulation Table*

| Research Questions | Survey | Focus Group Interview | Document Reviews |
|---|---|---|---|
| Overall Question Framework | x | x | x |
| Research Question 1 PD Needs | x | x | |
| Research Question 2 Growth Experiences | x | x | x |
| Research Question 3 PD Process | | x | x |
| Research Question 3a Perceived Benefits | | x | |
| Research Question 3b Perceived Barriers | x | x | x |
| Research Question 3c Organizational Culture | | x | |

Table 4 reflects the categories of findings or key themes that emerged from the data.

***Table 4***

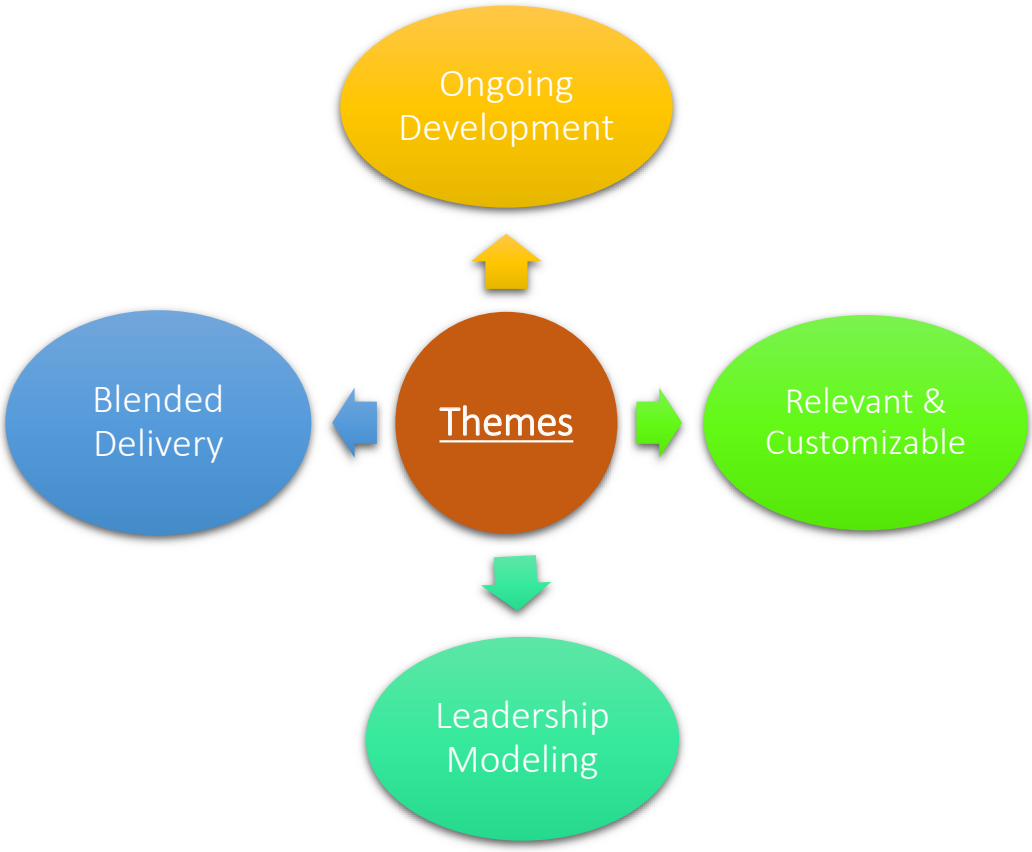
*Categories of Findings*

| Theme | Operationalization | Example/Quote |
|---|---|---|
| **Ongoing Development** | The desire for continuous, ongoing professional development opportunities | Shared desire for regular PD integrated into the work rather than the occasional "one-and-done" training. PD should be embedded in daily work and not just occasional formal training days. |
| **Relevant & Customizable** | Training tailored to specific departments and roles. | High value on role significance. PD should provide skills related to employee-specific roles rather than generic, one-size-fits-all training offerings. |
| **Leadership Modeling** | The ability to provide and demonstrate ongoing and continuous training opportunities. | Leadership involvement through resources, modeling, and ongoing training reinforcement. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Blended Delivery** | In-person and virtual training methods to balance relationship building and accessibility. | PD options to meet different needs. In-person or face-to-face offerings in large or small groups encourage relationship-building and virtual platforms allow for flexibility and accessibility to capture diverse audiences. |

**Figure 3**

*Theme 1: Ongoing Development*




**Theme 1: Ongoing Development**

To answer the study's first research question, "What is a best practices framework in providing professional development to business and operations staff in an urban Midwestern K-

12 school system?", the researcher developed four sections of the survey and eight individual focus group interview questions. Based on the results from the survey, focus group interview, and document review, overall responses contributed to the theme *Ongoing Development.* That is, the results from the survey indicated the need for hard and soft skill training up to four times per school year outside of contractual professional development days.

One specific response contributed to the theme *Ongoing Development* in line with answering the study's Research Question #1, "How do the business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern school district describe their ongoing professional development needs and experiences?". That is, the results from the survey indicated the need for more frequent and consistent training beyond onboarding.

In the survey, 46.6% of classified and non-instructional staff preferred to have training three to four times per school year. For soft-skill training, 40% of classified and non-instructional staff preferred three to four times per school year. The survey results revealed a strong desire for more frequent and continuous professional development opportunities.

One survey response was that professional development offerings for growth are seen as inconsistent. This survey response contributed to answering the study's Research Question #2, "How do business and operation staff in a large, urban Midwestern school district describe how ongoing professional development affects their personal and professional growth?" in line with the theme *Ongoing Development.* That is, the current offerings are limited while also not meeting the staff's professional development needs. Survey respondents provided varied insights into the differing experiences with professional development in the past school year. One respondent noted the abundance of training opportunities in the past school year while another expressed a lack of department-wide training for several years.

In line with the survey responses, the same results were found from the focus group interview, noting that professional development should not be occasional formal training days but rather embedded in daily work and interactions. An overarching focus group interview response was the emphasis on *providing* ongoing and consistent *professional development practices*. This focus group response contributed to answering the study's Research Question #3, "How do business and operations leaders in a large, urban Midwestern school district describe their best practices in providing professional development to business and operations staff?" in line with the theme *Ongoing Development.* That is, when focus group leaders were asked what they believed was the best practice framework for professional development, four out of the six participants named ongoing development as the best practice component. Adaptable-Visionary highlighted the daily and pervasive nature of ongoing development in every interaction. Similarly, Analyzer-Organizer stressed the continuous and uninterrupted nature of effective professional development. Empathetic-Fair similarly emphasized this, noting the importance of ongoing development. Empathetic-Fair further emphasized that ongoing development does not always require group gatherings but can be achieved through messaging, documentation, and feedback. Finally, Collaborative-Empowering emphasized the need for consistency and continuity in professional development efforts to induce meaningful change. This collective perspective from both survey responses and focus group leaders underscores the central theme of *Ongoing Development* as a crucial element in shaping effective professional development practices.

Consistently, document review results revealed no evidence of ongoing professional development offerings. Overall, the main finding is that staff want more regular, ongoing opportunities for professional development to meet their needs beyond the limited current

offerings. According to the focus group leaders, continuous, integrated development is a critical best practice. However, quotes from staff point to a lackluster and inconsistent training program.

**Theme 2: Relevant and Customizable**

To answer the study's second research question, "What is a best practices framework in providing professional development to business and operations staff in an urban Midwestern K-12 school system?", the researcher developed four sections of the survey and eight individual focus group interview questions. Based on the results from the survey, focus group interview, and document review, overall responses contributed to the theme *Relevant and Customizable.* That is, the results from the survey indicated the need for training related to employees' specific roles and day-to-day responsibilities. This survey response contributed to answering the study's Research Question #2, "How do the business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern school district describe their ongoing professional development needs and experiences?" in line with the theme *Relevant and Customizable.*

One survey response was that 64% viewed professional development for growth rather than punishment. This survey response contributed to answering the study's Research Question #3, "How do business and operation staff in a large, urban Midwestern school district describe how ongoing professional development affects their personal and professional growth?" in line with the theme *Relevant and Customizable.*

Survey responses shed light on the importance of relevance and customization in professional development. Participants expressed a strong desire for specific and targeted training that directly aligns with their roles. More specifically, one participant emphasized the need for more relevant training, expressing that it would be more beneficial than the generic training they had previously received. Another participant highlighted the importance of

relevance and customization in professional development, especially since there is a mismatch between the general training provided for teachers and its applicability to instructional aides. Thus, he emphasized the importance of tailoring training to job-specific requirements. Another participant, an instructional assistant, underscored the need for consistency in training programs between teachers and instructional assistants to effectively support students in the classroom. Currently, however, consistent training programs do not occur.

Several participants further voiced concerns about the lack of specific training on interpersonal skills and the imposition of beginner-level training on experienced individuals, further indicating the need for more personalized and advanced development opportunities. Critiques included the perceived ineffectiveness of small training modules designed for test completion rather than skill acquisition, and the absence of comprehensive onboarding. While some acknowledged training related to regulatory requirements, many felt that most professional development sessions throughout the school year were irrelevant to their specific job titles. In summary, these perspectives underscore the overarching theme of *Relevant and Customizable* as a critical component in shaping meaningful and impactful professional development experiences.

Same results in line with the theme *Relevant and Customizable* were found from the focus group interview and document review, noting the need for tailored training and avoiding one-size-fits-all training. An overarching focus group interview response was the emphasis on *providing* differentiate, equitable professional development practices based on specific roles. This focus group response contributed to answering the study's Research Question #3, "How do business and operations leaders in a large, urban Midwestern school district describe their best practices in providing professional development to business and operations staff?" in line with

the theme *Relevant and Customizable.* That is, respondents called for more tailored customized training focused on specific roles, rather than generic training.

More specifically, the focus group leaders' responses yielded a similar theme of *Relevant and Customizable*. Straight-Forward emphasized the importance of keeping skills aligned with technological changes and evolving processes, acknowledging the nuanced nature of this alignment across different schools. He stressed the tailored aspect of professional development (PD), noting that the specific needs may vary but should be addressed accordingly. Echoing this response, the Supportive participant highlighted the need for department-specific technical training, where distinct roles, such as *role* and *different department*, receive separate training sessions. This approach reflects a commitment to customization, ensuring that professional development efforts are not only relevant to current needs but also tailored to the specific requirements of different roles and departments. The overall sentiment in these responses affirms the overarching theme of *Relevant and Customizable* as essential in shaping effective and meaningful professional development practices.

An overarching document review response contributed to answering the study's Research Question #3, "How do business and operations leaders in a large, urban Midwestern school district describe their best practices in providing professional development to business and operations staff?" That is, document review results also showed a majority of compliance-driven topics and limited content rather than focusing on specialized needs.

Overall, the most important discovery obtained from the survey was that employees preferred department-specific training that was not a generic, one-size-fits-all skills training. Survey participants gave examples of receiving training that was irrelevant to their roles. Focus

group leaders emphasized the need for updated training in light of changing technology and procedures.

**Theme 3: Leadership Modeling**

To answer the study's overall research question, "What is a best practices framework in providing professional development to business and operations staff in an urban Midwestern K-12 school system?", the researcher developed four sections of the survey and eight individual focus group interview questions. Based on the results from the survey, focus group interview, and document review, overall responses contributed to the theme *Leadership Modeling*. More specifically, the results from the survey indicated that leaders should be trained and provide more training options and opportunities for staff.

Moreover, there were mixed opinions from survey respondents regarding whether or not the district leaders provided enough growth opportunities. On the Stapel Scale, 42.5% of the survey respondents rated the leadership's efforts in providing professional development or growth opportunities as "good," and 36% agreed that leadership's support in their personal and professional growth and development was also "good." However, some of the statements revealed dissatisfaction with leadership participation in staff's growth opportunities. Only 39% felt their district provided adequate growth opportunities.

An overall survey response contributed to answering the study's Research Question #2, "How do the business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern school district describe their ongoing professional development needs and experiences?" in line with the theme *Leadership Modeling.* That is, the results from the survey showed a shared perception of lack of leadership support. More specifically, one participant noted a perceived gap in proactive leadership involvement in fostering impactful learning opportunities.

That is, “leadership seems reluctant to provide meaningful training.” Additionally, another response noted the lack of training and support for ensuring comprehensive and inclusive training practices. There is thus a lack of “training and supporting special needs staff at all levels.” Another staff added the insufficient training provided to them, as well as a lack of standardized and enforced best practices. Collectively, these sentiments underscore the crucial role of leadership in modeling and shaping the overall professional development landscape, emphasizing the need for proactive, supportive, and standards-driven leaders who promote effective learning experiences.

One survey response was that access to growth from leaders is limited. This survey response contributed to answering the study’s Research Question #2, “How do business and operation staff in a large, urban Midwestern school district describe how ongoing professional development affects their personal and professional growth?” in line with the theme *Leadership Modeling.*

Consistently, the results from the focus group interview revealed that professional development must come from the top down and across. This overarching focus group interview response contributed to answering the study’s Research Question #3, “How do business and operations leaders in a large, urban Midwestern school district describe their best practices in providing professional development to business and operations staff?” Focus group leaders discussed modeling desired behaviors and showing staff they are valued through a long-term investment in their growth rather than short-term events. They each spoke about their responsibility as leaders to embed professional development opportunities into their daily work. More specifically, Analyzer-Organizer underscored the importance of leadership influence in shaping professional development. He put a specific emphasis on a top-down approach, implying

that effective professional development initiatives need support and direction from leadership. Breaking down silos and fostering collaboration is highlighted by Analyzer-Organizer as essential, as he noted that certain training programs, such as Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) training, have overlapping benefits. According to Analyzer-Organizer, when leadership promotes a holistic perspective on professional development, addressing diverse areas, it contributes to overall growth. This perspective from Analyzer-Organizer emphasizes the role of leadership in guiding and unifying professional development efforts for the benefit of the entire organization.

Also, Supportive shared his perspective regarding professional development within the organization. According to Supportive: “Well, we do all kinds of professional development departmental wide . . . every 2 months for a year and a half with them and them my leadership staff, they’re meeting every 6 weeks.” This response underscores the theme of "Leadership Modeling," as it demonstrates leadership's commitment to professional growth, fostering a culture of learning, collaboration, and ongoing development throughout the organization. The leadership’s engagement in regular training sessions sets a precedent and reinforces the value of learning, inspiring, and guiding the entire team toward a culture of continuous improvement.

Overall responses indicated some dissatisfaction with leadership’s support for meaningful training and growth, with only 39% of staff members feeling their district provided adequate growth opportunities. The focus group leaders emphasized the importance of leaders modeling desired behaviors, showing staff they were valued, and investing in long-term growth rather than short-term events.

Consistently, the document review results revealed the need for training for managers, as well as the lack of training for non-supervisory staff. This overarching document review

response contributed to answering the study's Research Question #3, "How do business and operations leaders in a large, urban Midwestern school district describe their best practices in providing professional development to business and operations staff?" The key takeaway was that although staff members' ratings of the support they received from leadership were mixed, focus group leaders emphasized the importance of leadership modeling, embedding development into the culture, and valuing staff growth.

**Theme 4: Blended Delivery**

To answer the study's first research question, "What is a best practices framework in providing professional development to business and operations staff in an urban Midwestern K-12 school system?", the researcher developed four sections of the survey and eight individual focus group interview questions. Based on the results from the survey, focus group interview, and document review, overall responses contributed to the theme *Blended Delivery*. More specifically, consistent results from the survey revealed the need to offer both in-person and virtual options.

One specific survey response contributed to answering the study's Research Question #1, "How do the business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern school district describe their ongoing professional development needs and experiences?" in line with the theme *Blended Delivery.* That is, the results from the survey showed an overwhelming preference of a blend of in-person and virtual training. When asked if they preferred in-person only, virtual only, or both in-person and virtual training options, 67.8% of the classified and non-instructional staff preferred both in-person and virtual training options.

One specific response was regarding the importance of the training location. One specific respondent underscored the challenges of participating in online classes at their desk due to a

hectic atmosphere, which is also prone to interruptions. The sentiment is extended to include those without dedicated offices, suggesting a broader impact on individuals across various work settings. As such, this response contributes to the theme *Blended Delivery*, highlighting the practical considerations related to the training environment. It is therefore worth acknowledging that a conducive and focused location is essential for optimal engagement and absorption of the training content.

Consistently, results from the focus group interview revealed that in offering blended delivery, it is important to recognize soft skills often require face-to-face. Focus group participants similarly stated responses that aligned with the theme *Blended Delivery*. An overarching focus group interview response was the emphasis on using both in-person and virtual training platforms. This focus group response contributed to answering the study's Research Question #3, "How do business and operations leaders in a large, urban Midwestern school district describe their best practices in providing professional development to business and operations staff?" in line with the theme *Blended Delivery.*

Adaptable-Visionary reported the use of virtual or in-person sessions based on appropriateness and need. Similarly, Analyzer-Organizer added that "It is perfect to allow both". That is, Analyzer-Organizer believed that there is value in both platforms and therefore a blended delivery, noting that the virtual setting can uncover additional skill sets, particularly in communication and technology. Additional skill sets in communication and technology may not be emphasized in a traditional in-person format. Finally, Collaborative-Empowering also noted the importance of having both face-to-face delivery and virtual sessions. More specifically, according to Collaborative-Empowering, face-to-face interactions increase one's sense of belonging while virtual sessions enable efficiency when time and location constraints arise.

Collectively, these perspectives underscore the theme of adaptability and vision in selecting the most suitable format for professional development, considering both virtual and in-person platforms based on contextual appropriateness and the diverse needs of participants.

The important takeaway from this theme is that both leaders and employees preferred a blended delivery model for professional development, which resulted in the development of the theme *Blended Delivery*. In-person training can make people feel more involved and part of the experience. Virtual offerings provide flexibility and aid in the development of technology skills and various modes of communication. Overall, the blended approach has the benefits of both online and face-to-face development. The document review results did not mention or reveal new data regarding any training platform.

In summary, the research highlights the importance of an organizational culture that values ongoing professional growth through role-specific development opportunities championed by leadership and delivered through blended in-person and virtual modes. The study found a discrepancy between the current limited professional development offerings and needs and desires of staff, indicating room for improvement. Leaders should seize this chance to integrate professional growth into the organizational culture instead of merely offering isolated training sessions.

**Types of Professional Development**

Survey participants and focus group leaders both agreed that practical interpersonal skills and technical skills are important areas for staff development. Training examples that emerged from the survey and focus group interview were communication; conflict resolution; problem-solving; job-specific or technical skills; soft skills; social-emotional learning (SEL); and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training. Communication skills training was a constant in both data sources as a top need; however, survey results reflected that classified and non-

instructional staff received conflict resolution training at a higher rate than communication skills training.

When asked about their preferred learning style, survey respondents preferred visual, kinesthetic, and auditory styles respectively. 22% of survey respondents named visual (pictures/examples) as their preferred learning style, followed by 20% kinesthetic (by doing), and auditory (listening/speaking, lectures, videos) at 15%. A best practices framework should consider the three preferred learning styles.

Although leaders and survey participants agreed on the need for differentiated training that is relevant and customizable, the professional development provided by leaders revealed that training options were not tailored to the diverse needs of classified staff roles but were compliance-driven. The training sample from the document review had a heavy emphasis on mandated compliance topics like harassment rather than professional growth. For example, annual or selective training through the district's learning management systems (LMS) and miscellaneous procedure training, such as employee misconduct process. The training seemed to be broad and generic rather than relevant customized training options to support job-specific duties. There was little evidence of ongoing professional development offerings for continuous growth. Overall, the design of the current professional development appeared to check a box rather than empower staff.

Results from the survey were consistent with the principles of andragogy and suggested that consideration for adult learning was lacking. The concept of andragogy or adult learning was developed by Malcolm Knowles (1978) to explain how adults engage in learning. Survey respondents solidified their desire to have a say in relevant and continuous learning processes where they can learn by doing and that promotes life-long growth (Donaldson & Scannell, 1986;

Knowles, 1978). Results from the focus group interview and document review reveal a gap in the professional development experience leaders want to provide their staff and what they currently offer. While leaders emphasized setting an example by embedding professional development into the work and workplace culture, they were not transformative in their approach to providing opportunities for growth. A transformational leader focuses on strategically changing culture by empowering staff and providing individual support (Anderson, 2017; Burns, 1978; Kirby et al., 1992). Although leaders discussed their thoughts on optimal development opportunities, there was limited evidence of transformational leadership in the process of professionally developing their staff. The results reveal that the current offerings were largely generic, one-off training that were more compliance-driven than transformative. Some examples are new hire training, license and certification training, and district PD day offerings.

**Best Practices Framework**

Best practices for a professional development framework for classified and non-instructional staff were examined in this study using a grounded theory methodology. The main conclusion of this study is a theoretical framework that suggests organizational mindsets and processes must change to become more proactive, ongoing, and strategically aligned to meet the professional development needs of classified and non-instructional staff in K-12 school districts. In the theoretical model developed in this study, elements of a professional development framework should include (a) ongoing development, (b) relevant and customizable, (c) leadership modeling, and (d) blended delivery. Based on the results of this study, leaders should consider and include these elements when designing professional development.

It is important to note that the themes alone did not make the best practices viable, but it was coupled with what the survey respondents and the focus group leaders said about the topic

along with what was lacking in the document reviews that made best practices credible. Finding themes was the first stage of determining best practices in providing PD, but fusing the themes with the surrounding language was what created the elements of a sustainable framework. In addition to the themes and language, consideration for the preferred learning styles is equally significant. Based on this study, visual and hands-on training options appealed most to classified and non-instructional staff.

Table 5 reflects best practices themes and framework elements based on the triangulated data from the survey, focus group interview, and document review. Within this table, the column Framework Elements is synthesized language from survey responses, focus group interviews, and document reviews. The professional development design must consider preferred learning styles.

**Table 5**

*Best Practices Framework*

**Best Practices for Professional Development Framework for Business and Operations Staff in an Urban Midwestern K-12 School District**

| Best Practice | *Framework Elements* |
|---|---|
| **1.0 Ongoing Development** ORQ, RQ1, RQ2 | *1.1 Develop Continuous Training Opportunities*<br>1.1.1 Hard Skills (job-specific training) 2-4 times per year<br>1.1.2 Soft Skills (relational skills training) 2-4 times per year<br>1.1.3 Structure (differentiated, equitable offerings, avoid sporadic training)<br>*1.2 Improve Morale*<br>1.2.1 Embed PD in daily work (thread training in daily duties)<br>1.2.2 Frequency (eliminate "one & done" and "one-size-fits-all training)<br>1.2.3 Flexibility (avoid rigid training schedules)<br>*1.3 Barriers*<br>1.3.1 Time (dedicate intentional planning time for PD)<br>1.3.2 Schedules (consider and intentionally plan around irregular work hours) |
| **2.0 Relevant & Customizable** ORQ, RQ1, RQ2, RQ3a | *2.1 Needs Assessment*<br>2.1.1 Determine Gaps (job-specific and relational skills)<br>2.1.2 Staff Input (use adult learning principles and preferred learning styles)<br>*2.2 Tailored Training*<br>2.2.1 Customize Job Training (skill relevance, not generic, learning styles)<br>2.2.2 Orientation (improve onboarding and cross-training) |

| | |
|---|---|
| | *2.3 Growth Oriented*<br>2.3.1 Differentiated (not one-size-fits-all; not tactical only, learning styles)<br>2.3.2 Relationship-Building (behavioral skills relevant to working with others)<br>*2.4 Alignment*<br>2.4.1 Academic and Operational Priorities (connection to student outcomes)<br>2.4.2 All district staff are educators (departmental interaction, break silos)<br>2.4.3 Evaluations (hard and soft skills)<br>*2.5 Barrier*<br>2.5.1 Costs (invest in tailored staff development) |
| **3.0**<br>**Leadership Modeling**<br>ORQ, RQ3, RQ3c | *3.1 Commitment*<br>3.1.1 Investment (provide opportunities for fundamental success and retention)<br>3.1.2 Support (staff development; communication)<br>3.1.3 Professional Development Plan (creative learning opportunities)<br>3.1.4 Proactive Design (create a focus group or system for designing PD plan)<br>*3.2 Culture Development*<br>3.2.1 Mindset (develop a growth mindset; embrace PD)<br>3.2.2 Culture (responsibility/accountability for creating a learning environment)<br>*3.3 Feedback*<br>3.3.1 Leaders and Staff (identify areas of improvement)<br>3.3.2 Survey staff (to determine PD; after each PD; determine learning styles)<br>*3.4 Increase Training Capacity*<br>3.4.1 Leader Participation (leadership individual development; train with staff)<br>3.4.2 Internal SME (leader training; identify staff subject matter experts to train)<br>*3.5 Barriers*<br>3.5.1 Mindset (expand understanding of PD, adult learning, and learning styles)<br>3.5.2 Time (prioritize PD; allocate planning time) |
| **4.0**<br>**Blended Delivery**<br>RQ3, RQ3a, RQ3b | *4.1 In-person*<br>4.1.1 Build Relationships (face-to-face interaction)<br>4.1.2 Soft Skill (best platform; interactive)<br>*4.2 Virtual*<br>4.2.1 Expand Skillset (use of technology; improve communication)<br>4.2.2 Maximize Demographics and Diversity (flexible and accommodating)<br>4.2.3 Minimum Reliance on Compliance-Driven Learning Management Systems (LMS) |

## Conclusion

The purpose of collecting data was to present the elements of a best practices professional development framework for business and operational staff in a large, urban school district. The results of this study revealed that the current state of professional development in two large, urban Midwestern school districts did not adequately meet staff needs and expectations of classified and non-instructional staff. In support of these conclusions are the themes or major

findings that emerged from the data collected from this study and a quote from the survey, focus group interview, or document review.

- Ongoing Development: Classified staff craved more frequent professional development opportunities that are relevant to their roles. *One respondent wanted "training pathways for staff beyond the contractual PD days."* This is in alignment with Empathetic-Fair's statement, "Well certainly it should be ongoing . . . and not just on PD days." However, the training listed in the document review did not reflect ongoing opportunities.
- Relevant and Customizable: *One survey respondent wrote, "We want more relevant, customized and frequent professional development."* The outcomes show that classified and non-instructional staff are dissatisfied with the lack of customized offerings and inconsistent training. *A respondent wrote, "Seems like training is only entry-level, and stays the same year in and year out! Should progress up as you progress up."* The results of the focus group interview reveal that leadership commitment to ongoing professional development was viewed as important; however, the document review showed them to be lacking. *A survey response stated, "The district seems reluctant to provide any meaningful training as they fear they will then lose workers to positions outside of the district.* Straight-forward spoke to this issue by paraphrasing a quote, "What if we invest in our employees and decide to leave and the counterpoint is what if we don't invest in our employees and they stay." He added, "There is a risk to investing in people, of course, but we are an organization of people, and if we're not willing to take that gamble, that risks, that

people will grow, and they'll want to stay. We are in the business of developing minds and it's an investment worth making."

The training content found in the document review shows that professional development offerings appear compliance-driven and reactive rather than empowering staff through continuous growth. An example is the comment from Straight-Forward who stated, "I have two admin staff that tend to participate in the PD offered through the district for improving technical skills (Microsoft or Google training)."

- Leadership Modeling: Collaboration between different departments and sites is lacking but essential for strategic alignment. Support and commitment from leadership were viewed as critical in providing the resources, reinforcement, and role modeling needed for success; however, the survey respondents did not feel that leaders modeled development or provided adequate resources for professional development. *One respondent stated, "We are allowed to seek out training, but training is not coordinated intentionally by leadership."* From the focus group, Adaptable-Visionary thought there was a need for leaders to do better and added, "I think one of the aspects for us is, by doing our professional development, it helps grow additional leaders potentially and give them growth opportunities and communication so that they don't feel like they're operating in the dark."
- Blended Delivery: There is a strong preference for a blend of in-person and virtual training options. To balance relationship building with convenience, a blend of accessible virtual training options and in-person development is preferred. *A survey respondent assessed, ". . . location is important because I don't drive."* From the focus group, Straight-Forward summed it up with, "I think

> flexibility is important, but the work lacks some [of] those foundational skills [like] those soft skills. I feel like those are some of the very hardest ones to teach [and] train in a virtual environment because the same people who are going to struggle with them are gonna retreat from them when they're on a screen like this. So I think you have to be able to be very tailored in terms of when you use virtual."

The researcher found that although focus group leaders shared positive and optimistic views about professional development, there was conflict between their comments, the list of training and barriers found during document review, and survey respondent perspectives on the current state of professional development. The dissonance stemmed from a misalignment of the leaders' strategic, empowering, and collaborative ideas of professional development versus their generalized, mandated, and tactical approach revealed in the survey responses and the leaders' lists of active training or barriers to training. Some examples are:

The focus group discussed the importance of strategic alignment and culture change; however, the documents reflected offerings that were compliance focused. Straight-Forward saw this as an "area for improvement, it would just be alignment between academic and operations. . . sometimes I feel like we're kind of feeling our way through the dark, trying to figure out how to align our efforts with what happens in our schools on a day-to-day basis"

Focus group leaders also promoted the concept of differentiated and tailored training, but the documents largely revealed a one-size-fits-all training content. Straight-Forward also offered that "there's some tailored PD that probably each of us are looking for that gets very complex because it doesn't necessarily apply to anybody else. He thought, "The foundational things are the easiest to overlook [skills like] time management, conflict resolution, and SEL

improvement." Survey respondents listed conflict resolution (10.79%), SEL (8.63%), and time management (5.24%) as training they have received at work; however, job-specific (15.27%); stress management (9.85%), and problem-solving (8.37%) were the top three trainings that respondents preferred to have. To further the point, a respondent stated, "Just some generic SEL PDs that are repetitive and do not connect anyone as staff/colleagues."

Leaders also discussed the importance of modeling behaviors, but the documents have little leadership-focused training and a survey respondent added "…our whole Department including management is Greatly needed!"

The survey sample included a variety of classed and non-instructional responsibilities, but no significant conflicts or opposing perspectives emerged between the different types of participants. For example, custodial services, safety and security, and transportation shared the same or similar viewpoints of secretaries, human resources, and instructional assistants. There was consistency among participants with their selection of predetermined training topics as they related to their professional duties. For instance, communication and conflict resolution were the top topics received for all roles, while job-specific training was the most frequently requested. An average training frequency of 1-4 times was found to be optimal for both hard and soft skills for most roles in the sample. Across groups, there were mixed opinions on the connection between workplace culture and professional development. Additionally, there appeared to be a lack of satisfaction with current professional development offerings and for every group, time was the biggest obstacle to taking part in professional development.

Staff perceptions of the leadership mindset did vary slightly. Although leaders were generally rated favorably for their efforts in offering professional development opportunities for growth, newer employees rated their leaders' PD offerings lower than did longer-tenured

employees. Specifically, the results showed that 46% of employees in their roles for fewer than five years and only 22% of workers with more than 15 years disagreed with the predetermined statement that “leaders offered sufficient PD opportunities.” Dissatisfaction also varied by role. The study indicated that staff members who had direct student interaction had distinct perspectives compared to operational roles about how well leaders were doing in providing professional development.

In contrast to respondents in facilities and maintenance, those working as instructional assistants and student support positions expressed notably lower levels of approval for their leader's professional development initiatives. Thus, newer staff members and staff who worked closely with students had the most critical opinions about the current PD offerings. This implied that while employees acknowledged that leaders tried to offer professional development opportunities, leaders must also consider that the needs, goals, and training preferences of their workforce may differ. This further implied even more strongly that a customized training program would be required.

Longer-tenured employees showed less enthusiasm for virtual delivery, but respondents still clearly preferred the blended approach, which is a mix of virtual and in-person training. Perspectives on the impact professional development had on culture did not differ significantly in terms of tenure or roles. While there were subtle differences across the groups, the overarching views about tailored training, overall experience, and employees’ attitudes about professional development were positive. Finally, the responses indicated that individuals with diverse roles and responsibilities consistently felt that professional development was a means of growth and rejected the idea that it was a form of punishment. Despite criticism of the leaders’ PD offerings, no major differences between participants with different professional roles

emerged in the data; however, exploring a study of the distinct group dynamics may yield additional information and insights.

Overall, staff and leaders both discussed the need for ongoing, relevant, and customizable training with leader support, and the document review revealed that leaders had not provided such training opportunities. This was consistent with the survey responses and suggested that while there were professional development pathways, there were also gaps in systems, content, and methods for providing meaningful professional development. Staff and leaders both agreed that blended delivery of in-person and virtual professional development platforms was best. A blended approach would satisfy the key learning styles classified and non-instructional staff preferred. Respondents from the survey, participants from the focus group, and the review of the training document all mentioned “time” as a barrier in providing and receiving PD, along with schedules and leaders' mindsets. Ultimately, the findings revealed a strong need and desire to rethink, reevaluate, and revamp professional development for business and operations staff that intentionally includes ongoing development that is relevant and customizable to meet the unique needs of staff, modeled by leaders with a blended delivery. Chapter 5 includes a summary for critical analysis and discussion on the four themes.

This study attempted to fill the gap in the existing literature about developing non-academic staff. It also attempted to find the best practices in making PD in business and operations not only meaningful for classified and non-instructional staff but also doable for leaders. The findings significant to this study came from surveying classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations, conducting a focus group interview with leaders in business and operations, and a review of documents provided by leaders that listed training opportunities or barriers that prevent them from providing their staff training. The survey

maximized the number of responses from staff. The focus group interview provided a deeper understanding of PD benefits and barriers from the leader's perspective. The synthesized data collected during the study provided a helpful best practice framework for designing a professional development plan for non-academic staff. In the next chapter, important discoveries will be covered, how they connect to the study in Chapter 2, along with recommendations for future research.

# CHAPTER V

# DISCUSSION

*"Intellectual growth should commence at birth and cease only at death." – Albert Einstein (n.d.)*

## Introduction

Classified and non-instructional staff play a significant role in the success of the school district. They are responsible for supporting teachers, cleaning buildings, landscaping, maintaining internal and external building functionalities, feeding students, transporting students, and keeping students safe. This staff also interacts with parents, the community, finances, public dollars, and district personnel but does not receive regular training and development opportunities for growth and skill improvement. Training and professional development (PD) improve the abilities required for high-caliber work performance (Weiss Bros, n.d.). The stronger the workforce, the better the environment. K-12 schools contain not only learning environments for students but also working environments staff. Teachers have relevant PD opportunities throughout the school year, but classified and non-instructional staff in a large, urban, Midwestern K-12 school district appear to lack equitable opportunities for training and professional development for growth and improved work performance.

This study examined the perceptions of professional development from classified, non-instructional staff, and leaders in business and operations in two large, urban Midwestern K-12 school districts. The researcher collected rich data from a survey, a focus group interview, and a document review. The data provided insight into what is necessary for operational leaders in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district to provide growth opportunities for the workforce that supports, encourages, and helps create the conditions for student learning and success.

This qualitative grounded theory study aimed to develop a best practices framework for leaders to provide professional development for classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations to mirror professional development opportunities provided for teachers. The literature on teacher development is extensive, but personnel in business and operations lack a professional development framework. Additionally, little research has been done on how classified and non-instructional staff perceive opportunities for professional development as a means of growth. The goal of the study is to add to the existing body of knowledge by offering a blueprint for how operational leaders in urban school districts can be intentional about providing development opportunities relative to the work and responsibility of their non-teaching staff.

The results of this study reveal a gap between the professional development that leaders desired to offer their staff and the training staff received. Thus, this comprehensive examination of classified and non-instructional staff, as well as leaders in business and operations, offers a direct and insightful look into their views that shaped a best practice professional development framework. The following section briefly summarizes the study, research design, data collection methods, and sample characteristics. It also provides an overview of the key components of the study. The remaining sections in this chapter include a summary of findings and implications and a discussion of findings. This chapter includes an explanation of the research in relation to the theoretical framework and literature review discussed in Chapter Two, as well as the conclusions drawn in Chapter Four. Furthermore, this chapter proceeds with discussions regarding limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, significance of the study, and a conclusion to close the study (Youngstown State University, 2019).

## Summary of the Study

This was a qualitative study that used a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory helps to produce new ideas in the researcher's field and the greater body of research literature (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Tie et al. (2019) ascertained that grounded theory "is appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon; the aim being to produce or construct an explanatory theory that uncovers a process inherent to the substantive area of inquiry" (p. 2). The data collection process for this study included an anonymous survey for classified and non-instructional staff, a confidential focus group interview of six operational leaders, and document reviews requested from the same six operational leaders of two large, urban Midwestern K-12 school districts. A third district only allowed studies on students, teachers, and principals and denied the request since the population of this study was non-academic staff and leaders.

To address the study's research question, data were collected and reviewed from (a) survey respondents and (b) a focus group. The focus group was digitally recorded, transcribed, and member checked. Data were analyzed and coded using the following four steps of grounded theory described by Merriam and Grenier (2019) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016):

1. Open coding (transcription – focus group interview)
2. Axial coding (grouped data [color coded] to add meaning – focus group interview, survey responses)
3. Selective coding (refine data to construct emerging theories – focus group interview, survey responses, document reviews)
4. Constant comparative analysis (define which part of the data to include and exclude (focus group interview, survey responses, document reviews).

Factors examined in the study stem from the perceptions of classified and non-instructional staff and leaders in business and operations in two large, urban Midwestern K-12 school settings. Through the exploration of participant perceptions, the study sought to answer the primary research question about a best practice framework. To delve deeper into the subject, three follow-up questions and three supplemental questions accompany the main research question. This is necessary in this grounded theory study for identifying components of a best practices professional development framework.

Overall RQ: What were the best practices for providing professional development for business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district?

RQ 1: How do the business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district describe their professional development needs and experiences?

RQ2: How do the business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district describe how professional development impact their personal and professional growth?

RQ3: How do business and operations leaders in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district describe their best practices in providing professional development to business and operations staff?

a. What are the perceived benefits of implementing an ongoing professional development framework for business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K-12 school district?

b. What are the perceived barriers or challenges in implementing an ongoing professional development framework for business and operations staff in a large, urban, Midwestern K-12 school district?

**c.** In what ways does providing an ongoing professional development framework for business and operations staff in a large, urban, Midwestern K-12 school district affect the organizational culture?

## Summary of Findings

The questions in this grounded theory study are developed in accordance with existing literature related to professional development for teachers since a best practice framework for PD for classified and non-instructional staff does not exist. Several findings were drawn from the data analysis from a focus group interview of six male leaders (leader one, leader two, leader three, leader four, leader five, and leader six) and 157 classified and non-instructional survey respondents in business and operations from two large, urban Midwestern K-12 school districts. Classified and non-instructional staff respondents included bus drivers, bus aides, capital improvements, custodians, food nutrition/service, human resources, information technology, paraprofessionals (instructional aides), purchasing, safety and security, secretaries, and tradespeople (maintenance). This section discusses the study's key findings and their connection to the existing research and theoretical frameworks.

Perspectives shared by 157 classified and non-instructional survey respondents and six focus group leaders were instrumental in shaping the resulting grounded theory framework. Survey and focus group responses directly influenced the initial concepts and categories that emerged during open coding. Additionally, the axial coding process of continual comparison was driven by their voices that included compared and contrasted agreements and differences. Their experiences and perceptions provided the qualitative information needed for this grounded theory approach. The 157 survey responses made validation and saturation of the findings possible. Although the literature review provided context, the newly gathered qualitative data

tailored to the population and topic studied guided the grounded theory. This resulted in a fundamental theory deeply based on the needs, values, and perceptions of the survey and focus group participants.

Data collected from a survey sample of classified and non-instructional staff include four sections with a maximum of 10 questions each (see Appendix C). Eight questions, prepared by the researcher, were posed to focus group leaders consistent with the research questions (see Appendix F). In addition, a list of professional development offerings or obstacles that kept leaders from offering PD was requested for a document review (see Appendix H). Each question validated the study's conclusions regarding a professional development best practices framework for classified and non-instructional staff. Table 6 shows the alignment between the research questions, sub-questions, and data sources.

**Table 6**

*Triangulation Table*

| Research questions | Survey | Focus group interview | Document reviews |
|---|---|---|---|
| Overall Research Question Framework | x | x | x |
| Research Question 1 PD Needs | x | | |
| Research Question 2 Growth Experiences | x | x | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Research Question 3 | | | |
| PD Process | | x | x |
| Research Question 3a | | | |
| Perceived Benefits | | x | |
| Research Question 3b | | | |
| Perceived Barriers | x | x | x |
| Research Question 3c | | | |
| Organizational Culture | | x | |

Through grounded theory processes, four identified themes emerged from both surveys and the focus group interview. Findings were either not included or inconsistent with current training offerings as confirmed by the document reviews. All these findings support the development of a best practices framework for providing professional development to classified and non-instructional staff.

More specifically, these four findings for developing a best practices framework for providing professional development for classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations are as follows: (a) ongoing development integrated into the work of business and operations staff members rather than one-and-done training; (b) relevant and customizable training to provide skills to update and hone specific skills related to job roles rather than

generic, one-size-fits-all training; (c) leadership modeling to demonstrate, participate in, and reinforce the importance of ongoing, relevant, and customizable training; and (d) blended, accessible, and flexible delivery processes to accommodate employees' schedules. These findings capture a large virtual audience and encourage relationship-building through face-to-face interaction and align with the key principles of Knowles' (1978) adult learning theory, Burns' (1978) transformational leadership theory, and Schein's (1993) organizational culture theory. Adult learners, according to Knowles (1978), are self-directed, motivated by relevant content, and draw from life experiences.

Finally, leaders who foster a culture of learning align with leaders' influence over the workplace culture (Schein, 1993). This is evidenced by the leaders' desire to offer a blended delivery of PD platforms and embed PD into the daily work. Thus, a best practice framework includes the four findings that are ongoing, relevant, and customizable modeled by the leader, and offers a mix of virtual and in-person training options. In sum, the findings of the study as related to the overall research questions highlighted the professional development the classified and non-instructional staff wanted, what focus group leaders intended to provide, and what was reflected or lacking in the document reviews. The results revealed that current PD offerings in two large, urban Midwestern K-12 school districts lack consistency in providing these elements, although it was evident that both staff and leaders prefer a professional development plan that is ongoing, relevant, and customizable and modeled by leadership with a blended delivery of virtual and in-person training options. Based on the results of the study, it is suggested that these findings are used as a framework for providing professional development to create a consistent PD program that appeals to the adult learner.

## Discussion of Findings

Based on the viewpoints on professional development (PD), the focus group and survey sample indicate that current PD practices need improvement. According to the results of this study, a successful framework for professional development for classified and non-instructional staff working in business and operations should have the following four key components: a) ongoing development, b) relevant and customizable, c) leadership modeling, and d) blended delivery. Classified, non-instructional staff, and leaders in business and operations agreed that broad, one-and-done topic training sessions are not effective, and it was evident that leaders are responsible for offering and participating in PD. Finally, study participants agreed on the value of using a virtual platform; however, the consensus amongst leaders is that a virtual platform cannot replace the relationship-building aspect of in-person sessions. This is important for creating a solid PD program for non-teaching staff in business and operations.

The theories that guided this study were adult learning theory (Knowles, 1978; Kolb, 1984), transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978), and organizational culture theory (Schein, 1993). According to Rule and John (2015), "Theories help to interpret and explain phenomena" (p. 2). The authors also offered that theories function as lenses that provide many perspectives for perceiving and comprehending phenomena (Rule & John, 2015). This section of the chapter discusses each of these major themes, as related to the theories and past literature on these topics.

### Theme One: Ongoing Development

The first theme in the findings is Ongoing Development. Based on the viewpoints, survey and focus group participants preferred to have ongoing development as opposed to a one-time training. The study found that classified and non-instructional staff reported a lack of consistency

in training. Survey respondents indicated a strong desire for improved professional development as it relates to consistency. A large percentage considered the offerings to be irregular. Overall, survey respondents showed dissatisfaction with the lack of consistent training opportunities. This suggests that regular training was lacking. Conversely, throughout the focus group interview, leaders emphasized that professional development should be continuous and integrated rather than merely occurring occasionally or during official training days. Although leaders discussed the value and advantages of professional development, leaders all agreed that their programs were broad and irregular.

This theme is in line with the theory of andragogy, that is finding that professional development opportunities need to be continuous is in line with Malcolm Knowles's (1978) research on andragogy. Each group wanted regularly scheduled meaningful training which added to their knowledge and experiences (Donaldson & Scannell, 1986; Knowles, 1978). According to Donaldson and Scannell (1986), one of the key concepts of learning is that learning is a continuous and continual process, which is aligned with the first identified theme in this study.

This theme, Ongoing Development, also aligns with the transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978). A growth-oriented leader will model growth for the workforce (Dweck, 1999; Mlakar, 2019). Leader Three and Leader Four named an "ongoing (PD) process" as a process of building "hard" and "soft" skills. Leader Six discussed "forcing" staff to participate in PD because "sometimes staff does not want to attend PD"; but if they "make the best of it, there are good things you're going to learn from it."

Aside from theories, this theme is also in line with past literature regarding ongoing professional development and its benefits. According to Sancar et al. (2021) and Zhukova (2018), ongoing professional development creates sustained deeper learning; continual growth,

implementation time, reflection, and feedback-driven improvements. However, past research findings were focused on teachers' professional development (Antinluoma et al., 2018; Zhukova, 2018). This theme, therefore, adds new knowledge to the need and importance of ongoing professional development among classified and non-instructional staff.

**Theme Two: Relevant and Customizable**

The second theme in the findings is relevant and customizable, which is prevalent in that classified and non-instructional staff wanted relevant and customizable professional development. If given a choice, classified and non-instructional staff reported wanting more job-specific training. Practical topics like communication, conflict resolution, and problem-solving were also preferred "skill-building" training. This is consistent with the type of training offered by leaders as expressed in the survey results. In the interview, leaders talked about trying to provide tailored and differentiated PD for specific roles and needs instead of taking a one-size-fits-all approach. It was concerning that most respondents had less than 10 years experience, but only 16% marked 'orientation' as a level of training.

It was evident that survey respondents did not feel that the current PD offerings adequately met their needs. There was dissonance between what PD the staff received compared to the PD they desired. More specifically, this theme can be found in survey responses such as "They force us to take beginner-level training. Experienced people should not be forced to sit through a rudimentary and in turn very boring class all day." Another respondent stated, "The rest of all PDs through the school year do not relate to my specific job title at all and mostly feel like a waste of my time." Based on pre-populated topics, many survey respondents reported receiving conflict resolution and diversity training; however, they also desired to enhance their job-specific skills and training on managing their stress.

Relevant and customizable training is an effective learning experience for adults. This major finding is supported by adult learning theory (Knowles, 1978). Unlike teaching children, adults are self-directed learners who bring experiences and knowledge to the learning environment (Hogue, 2019). Moreover, Kolb and Plovnick (1974) added that adults need to know the benefits of the content while connecting new learning with previous experiences. It is evident in the study that current PD offerings fall short of meeting the needs of the classified and non-instructional staff.

Relevant and customizable PD is in line with the needs of adults who prefer specialized training over generalized training. Overall, the finding that underscores the need for professional development to be relevant and customizable is in line with Malcolm Knowles's (1978) research on andragogy. According to Donaldson and Scannell (1986), one of the key concepts of learning is that people learn at different rates and thus require personalized and targeted training, which is aligned with the theme identified in this study.

Overall, a one-size-fits-all training approach contradicts the principle and theory of adult learning. Knowles (1978) found that adults actively participate in learning pertinent to their experiences. Knowles (1978) and Kolb (1984) both emphasized the value of growth that is appropriate and adaptable, which draws on internal motivations for adult learners. Adults learn best when the material applies to their line of work, and personalization enables activities to be specifically tailored to the needs of the individual over time (Knowles, 1978; Kolb, 1984). These assertions are in line with the theme of this study Relevant and Customizable.

**Theme Three: Leadership Modeling**

The third theme in the findings is Leadership Modeling. Based on the overall responses, leaders emphasized setting an example by embedding professional development into the work

and workplace culture. However, the leaders were not transformative in their approach to providing growth opportunities. Leader Four discussed in detail the idea of breaking silos and considering SEL and CPI training for operational staff as a means of creating growth; however, neither topic nor similar training was offered in his PD plan.

It was clear that a professional development program is not ongoing. This finding uncovered an uninspiring leadership model. The results of the survey and focus group interview indicate that staff and leaders are not actively participating in opportunities for professional development. In addition, the document review did not point to the potential of any future development opportunities. Although leaders were optimistic about their desire to provide growth opportunities, there was also no evidence of their providing personal or professional growth opportunities based on the document reviews. That is, the results from the document review indicate that leaders do not have a best practices model for providing professional development to business and operations staff in a large, urban Midwestern K12 school district. Leader Four admitted that this is an area where his team "struggled a little bit" but attributed "building relationships" to "delivering good customer service and better [PD] outcomes [for growth]." Leaders discussed an intention to provide meaningful and tailored PD, but the survey results proved contrary to these intentions and the document review reflected sporadic PD offerings to their staff. This means that the training sample from the document review had a heavy emphasis on mandated compliance topics like harassment rather than professional growth. For instance, it included annual or selective training through the districts' learning management systems (LMS) and miscellaneous procedure training, such as employee misconduct process.

This gap relates to Knowles' (1978) adult learning theory, which emphasizes the adult need for immediately applicable content. The compliance-driven PD in the documents lacks

relevance to role-based development. The gap in leadership modeling relates to transformational leadership (Burns, 1978). A leader's commitment to implementing a comprehensive PD program will model their value in development. Schein (1993) highlighted artifacts as expressions of organizational values.

The study also determined that there was a disconnect between leaders' aspirations and actual PD practices. Overall results from the focus group interview and document review revealed a gap in the PD experience leaders want to provide their staff and what they currently offer. Leaders were asked how they differentiated PD for their distinct workforce. Leader Three made the distinction that teachers have an academic calendar while business and operations do not. He responded that "PD is geared more primarily for the teachers [and] not structured or calendared for operational staff." He furthered, "The different departments have their own PD." It is important to consider not only the work that needs to be done but also the people who are doing the work. When leaders plan PD, they must go beyond developing the job training. Leader Five surmised, "I think flexibility is important, but the work lacks some [of] those foundational skills [like] those of soft skills."

Overall findings in this study showed that the documents did not align with the value of professional development that leaders discussed. Intentions are not enough for relevant PD to become an embedded best practice. If PD is truly important, leaders must align their intentions with an ongoing professional development program based on the principles of adult learning.

This theme Leadership Modeling is consistent with past research, as leaders are identified as the key actors for setting expectations and are responsible for giving employees a chance to engage in professional development (Mlakar, 2019; Zhukova, 2018). As such, leadership modeling aligns with transformational leaders who put their personal growth into their own lives

first and implement PD programs that demonstrate what is valued (Burns, 1978). Transformational leaders model a growth mindset and set the tone for acceptable behavior (Burns, 1978; Dweck, 1999; Mlakar, 2019). While this theme is consistent with past literature, the findings of this study extend past research on this topic. Past literature indicated the significance of building administrators offering professional development opportunities to teachers to broaden their knowledge about growth mindset (Dweck, 1999; Mlakar, 2019). However, the literature does not address the need for operational leaders to give classified and non-instructional staff members consistent chances for professional development to broaden their mindset, knowledge, or skills.

Furthermore, the finding around leadership modeling based on the leaders' intention to provide PD revealed a gap between ideas and practice. We can relate this gap in terms of theory. This disconnect related to Burns' (1978) transformational leadership theory, which focused on leaders inspiring followers to higher levels of morals and motivation through modeling behaviors and values. The lack of evidence of growth from current training indicated leaders are not providing the meaningful PD they discussed, and they are not modeling their ideals. Thus, there is a discrepancy between leaders' stated values around PD and staff's actual PD experiences. A commitment to leadership modeling by providing ongoing PD and implementing a comprehensive professional development program could close this gap and increase their impact (Burns, 1978).

It was evident that the perception of leadership involvement in professional development between staff and leaders did not align. Based on the analysis, a small percentage of respondents felt their districts provided adequate growth opportunities. Furthermore, leaders discussed wanting to take a more strategic, collaborative, relational, and culture-oriented approach to

professional development. This is in line with past assertions, noting that a leader's strategy should include culture improvement (Burns, 1978; Schein, 1993). This is consistent with Schein's (1993) organizational culture theory. Both priorities are integral to the professional development process (Schein, 1993). Leader One mentioned that creating an environment of showing 100% "care" for staff changes the workplace culture. Leader Five added the idea of the leader creating an environment of "accountability" and "empowerment." Overall, all leaders agreed that ongoing development contributed to the workplace environment. Leader One offered that this leads to "a better culture."

However, the document review revealed that this was not happening. Each leader opposed isolated training and spoke highly of collaborative experiences. They also expressed a strong commitment to modeling their desired change on a daily basis, but none produced any evidence that this has or will occur. Ultimately, it was apparent that there were inefficiencies in training for leaders; thus, revealing the challenge of leaders to provide their staff with professional development opportunities when they are not receiving PD themselves. As such, Leadership Modeling also aligns with adult learning theory as leaders must also participate in professional development. Survey respondents stated that training for the management is "greatly needed." Concurrently, leaders in the focus group also suggested that they should be developed "just as much."

**Theme Four: Blended Delivery**

The fourth and final identified theme in this study is Blended Delivery. That is, there was an overwhelming response from each group that the use of a blended delivery of virtual and in-person training platforms was appropriate when used effectively. Focus group leaders were able to speak about the subject in detail. To accommodate the needs of their staff, leaders expressed

the need to offer a combination of virtual and in-person training options based on what they wanted to accomplish during the training. All leaders agreed that there were benefits to using both virtual and in-person training. Five of the six leaders agreed that virtual training was the best platform for flexibility and to gather their large number of staff members.

This theme is in line with past research studies that underscored the many advantages of having a mix of virtual and in-person professional development offerings (Cilliers et al., 2022; Gross et al., 2023). Research has shown that a blend of virtual and in-person development provides well-rounded options catering to diverse staff needs, flexibility, inclusivity, digital skills, and engagement (Williams, 2020). Digital tools building technology skills is more cost efficient and helps normalize digital experiences for staff while in-person training facilitates relationship and team building (Cilliers et al., 2022; Williams, 2020). However, Cilliers et al. (2022) indicated that it could be challenging to duplicate the advantages of face-to-face interaction, which was also a reported note in one of the responses in this study.

All leaders agreed on this finding that a blended delivery of virtual and in-person training platforms is necessary and consistent with transformational leadership theory. This is because leaders must consider time, location, and environmental when delivering PD. Leader Five stated that "you have to be able to be very tailored when you use virtual [training]."

**Summary of Comparison of Themes With Past Research**

In summary, responses provided in this study support the themes that emerged from the data and align with the research question and sub-questions. Such themes are used to develop a grounded theory in a qualitative method to develop a best practices framework for providing professional development opportunities for classified and operational staff.

Table 7 demonstrates the connection between each key finding concerning the body of knowledge regarding a professional development best practices framework for classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations. The results validate what is already known in the literature about how adults learn and the kind of leader that motivates staff and transform organizations (Akdere & Egan, 2020; Anderson, 2017; Burns, 1978; Kirby et al., 1992; Knowles, 1978).

**Table 7**

*Comparison of Key Findings With Existing Research on Professional Development for Classified and Non-instructional Staff*

| Key findings | Previous research |
|---|---|
| Ongoing Development | Confirms the research by Sancar et al., 2021, & Zhukova (2018) as compared to ongoing development for teachers for deeper development and continued growth. |
| Relevant & Customizable | Knowles (1978) and Kolb (1984) would agree that adults are prone to learn when PD is pertinent and tailored. This is in line with the What's In It For Me (WIIFM) approach to adult learning. |
| Leadership Modeling | This is a new finding, as no research exists studying operational leaders modeling training for classified and non-instructional staff. Confirms Mlakar (2019) about principals "modeling" desired behaviors for teachers. Burns (1978) would agree that a transformational leader would likely improve professional development offerings for classified and non-instructional staff. |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Dweck (1999) would also agree that a leader must have a growth mindset to bring about change. |
| Blended Delivery | As no research exists studying a mixed delivery for virtual and in-person PD for classified and non-instructional staff, this is a new finding. Confirms Mourao (2017) about differentiated training methods and Williams (2020) in the importance of digital competency. Cilliers et al. (2022) and Gross et al. (2023) both discuss the benefits and challenges of virtual and in-person training platforms. |

**A Best Practice Framework for Professional Development.** The themes that emerged from the data were consistent among both the survey results and the focus group interview. Each group believed professional development was important to the success of classified and non-instructional staff. It was apparent that the leaders wanted to improve training opportunities; however, their list of training and barriers to providing training revealed dissonance between their desired offerings and the limited or compliance-driven training provided. In other words, although leaders had a growth mindset about the value of professional development, they had a narrow or fixed mindset in the makeup of their actual PD offerings (Dweck, 1999; Mlakar, 2020).

After sifting through the data until no other categories emerged, it became evident that the key themes of a professional development framework for business and operations staff in urban Midwestern school districts included providing them with (a) ongoing development, (b)

relevant and customizable training opportunities, (c) modeling of leadership development, and (d) blended delivery options. Based on the results of this study, leaders should consider and include these elements when designing professional development for staff in business and operations. It is important to note that the key themes alone did not make the best practices credible. Nonetheless, it was what the survey respondents and the focus group leaders said about the topic along with what was lacking in the document reviews.

Finding themes was only the first stage of developing a best practices framework for providing PD. The second stage was to fuse the themes with the surrounding language to create the elements of a sustainable framework. The overarching result is that best practices of professional development must comprise a continual, needs-driven process that is inclusive and facilitated through diverse and flexible training experiences.

## Theoretical and Practical Implications

### Theoretical Implications

It appears that both survey respondents and focus group leaders agree that the current PD program is sporadic and consists of irrelevant training. Survey respondents shared the need for leaders to also participate in professional development opportunities. Both groups also agreed that a mix of virtual and in-person training options was necessary. Thus, based on the results of the data collected and analyzed in this study suggest that a professional development program that is ongoing, relevant, customizable, and leader-modeled with the flexibility of a blend of virtual and in-person delivery make up the best practices professional development framework for classified and non-instructional staff members. According to the literature, this is true for teachers; thus, it stands to reason that providing classified and non-instructional staff with access to this procedure will surely enhance the environment for learning and achievement for students.

Andragogy, or adult learning, and transformational leadership provided the theoretical foundation for this study. The examination between professional development (PD) for classified and non-instructional staff is grounded in the adult learning theory, and the transformational leadership theory is the foundation for the leaders' duty to provide it effectively. Leaders who fail to offer appropriate opportunities for training and professional development will contend with deficiencies in their workforce that may negatively impact the workplace culture. This is consistent with the organizational culture theoretical framework (Schein, 1993). Paais and Pattiruhu (2020) and Khan et al. (2020) established a link between leadership and the advantages and structure of the workplace culture.

Admiraal et al. (2021) and McChesney and Aldridge (2019) mentioned that professional development should be available to all members of the educational workforce. Donaldson and Scannell (1986) added that adults learn (1) through self-activity, (2) at different rates, (3) through continuous learning, (4) by stimulating the senses, (5) through positive reinforcement, and (6) by doing. Based on an analysis of the business and operational staff and leaders, gaps existed in the professional development that employees receive, what leaders wish to deliver, and what leaders are truly providing. In describing transformational leadership, Burns (1978) and Khan et al. (2020) proposed the idea of taking people into consideration, intellectually stimulating them, inspiring and motivating them, and creating an ideal environment for success. Employee development is made possible by this kind of environment and leadership. In this way, a leader who does not offer effective professional development opportunities hinders staff development.

The survey of classified and non-instructional staff, focus group interview of six leaders in business and operations, and the focus group member checks supported the adult learning and transformational leadership theories. Classified and non-instructional staff felt their district

training program did not sufficiently meet their needs and leaders struggled with creating a comprehensive PD program that met the needs of their staff. Yet, the literature revealed that programs emphasizing significant and superior teacher development have the power to improve teachers' abilities and mindsets in the classroom, which benefits students' education (Beavers, 2009; Mlakar, 2019). In fact, according to the adult learning theory, the same improvement would occur if classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations were provided the same chance for professional development.

**Practical Implications**

Several useful insights were derived from the study, which are included below. First, there is a need for a professional development framework for classified and non-instructional staff. Survey respondents were clear in their desire for ongoing and meaningful PD that helped them improve their hard and soft skills. Focus group leaders shared a desire to provide meaningful PD but could not do so because a framework did not yet exist to guide their efforts. All research participants concurred that the existing offerings of professional development for non-instructional and classified employees were insufficient and inefficient. The district can benefit from adding a best practices framework for providing non-teaching staff professional development opportunities for growth. This goes beyond the existing literature that is limited to using professional development for evaluations of job performance (<Anonymous> School Board of Education, 2015; Turner, 2002).

The overall implication for this study is the need for a best practices professional development framework to guide leaders in business and operation in creating a strong PD program for classified and non-instructional staff. In doing so, they may be able to better develop

classified and non-instructional staff by delivering skills relevant to their responsibilities instead of general, one-size-fits-all training.

The overall implication of this study serves as the foundation for further conclusions. If there are no guidelines to follow, a framework for best practices is restricted. Thus, a second implication for this study is the need for the PD program to be ongoing throughout the school year. Both leaders and staff admitted that one-time training is not effective. Each participant felt that an equal structure of job-specific (hard) skills and relational (soft) skills needed to be offered continuously for continual learning engagement. A third implication for this study is the need for training that is specific to the needs of the staff. Classified and non-instructional staff expressed a strong desire to have meaningful training tailored to their occupations. Training that is irrelevant contradicts its purpose of learning new skills. Enhancing role-specific simulation skills through training and exercises constitutes professional growth (Hallmark et al., 2021).

Leveraging the resources necessary to support continuous professional growth for classified and non-instructional staff may be challenging. One difficulty may be locating the resources in the first place, as many of the skills that may be taught through professional development to these staff members will regard either job roles that are not instructional in nature or relational skills that are often not taught in the context of professional development. Vendors do exist for teaching relational skills such as time management and organization, communication skills, and others. School and district leaders should allocate time to finding and securing these vendors for classified and non-instructional staff in the same way they do for certified and instructional staff. At this stage, a second challenge emerges in the form of the scarcity of financial resources that many schools and districts face. In the same way that certified and instructional staff sometimes provide professional development to one another through staff-

led sessions, so too can classified and non-instructional staff with specific skills of focus can share insights with their colleagues through similar sessions. Doing so may also increase staff morale, as individual staff members are recognized for their skills through such a system.

This study's fourth implication involves the role of the leader in creating a robust professional development program for classified and non-instructional staff that mirrors the outcomes of a teachers' PD program. A growth mindset leader believes that people are capable of learning (Mlakar, 2019). Although the leaders of the focus groups expressed a strong desire to provide their workers with continuous and customized professional development, their efforts were hindered by their lack of participation in training. Nonetheless, leaders can only provide their employees these kinds of learning experiences to the extent that they themselves take advantage of growth chances. The fifth and final implication of this study is the need for a mix of virtual and in-person training platforms. A significant number of classified and non-instructional staff favored a blended delivery approach to receiving PD. Leaders affirmed this idea by determining that in situations requiring flexibility, to use a virtual platform; in other cases, use the in-person to establish relationships.

Some of these solutions address a significant potential barrier to the provision of continuous professional development to classified and non-instructional staff: time, or the lack thereof. There tend to be fewer classified and non-instructional staff members in each role than there are teachers, and making professional development efficient with skills applicable to a number of non-instructional roles would be appropriate. However, classified and non-instructional staff may not have consistent schedules and may not share non-work time with other non-instructional staff in other roles. Differing work schedules makes the provision of continuous professional development difficult, so offering sessions using a number of media

(e.g., online, in-person) can help to overcome this challenge. Another strategy is to deliver professional development sessions in small groups and at multiple times, thus enabling staff with different work schedules to attend.

In all, with best practices framework, the district and operational leaders can stand to gain from investing in their non-teaching staff by designing a professional development program tailored to their requirements. Leaders offering a comprehensive training program that considers the adult learner could promote an inclusive, engaged, and interactive workplace culture. A professional development plan that supports classified and non-instructional employees' ongoing growth would assist the district in a manner similar to how it helps teachers, by enhancing workforce capacity. As a result, the best practice framework acts as a roadmap to help program directors intentionally create professional development initiatives that cater to the various training requirements of adult learners.

## Limitations of the Study

There are limitations to this study. The small number of anonymous survey respondents was deliberately chosen to represent a variety of classified and non-instructional occupations. However, the majority of responses were not from the predefined categories, but from paraprofessionals, library aides, and coaches. Male and female leaders in business and operational were also sought after to participate in the focus group, but only male leaders responded. Although the leaders' focus group and survey sample offered insightful feedback on the study, it would have been beneficial to include the viewpoints of participants from a larger pool of female leaders and classified and non-instructional staff. Would more bus drivers, custodians, human resources, and female leaders yield the same conclusions?

The researcher's personal experiences as a professional development facilitator and participant represent another limitation. To prevent the insertion of personal opinions, the researcher carefully scrutinized the survey data and member-checked the focus group interview to ensure accuracy and dependability. This grounded theory study will contribute to the research on a best practice professional development framework for classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations in a large metropolitan school system, in spite of the limitations that have been highlighted.

Furthermore, while this grounded theory study contributes valuable insights into the development of a best practice professional development framework for classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations within two large metropolitan school systems, the findings may not be fully transferrable to other educational contexts or organizational settings. Variations in institutional structures, resources, and cultural dynamics could impact the applicability of the study's conclusions beyond the specific context in which it was conducted.

In conclusion, while this study provides valuable contributions to the research literature, particularly in the realm of professional development for classified and non-instructional staff, it is essential to recognize and acknowledge the inherent limitations outlined above. Future research endeavors should aim to address these limitations by employing more diverse sampling strategies, minimizing researcher biases, and exploring the transferability of findings across different contexts.

## Recommendation for Future Research

Overall, findings from the survey, focus group interview, and document review found inadequacies in the current professional development offerings for classified and non-instructional staff in two large, urban Midwestern K-12 school districts. This grounded theory

study laid the foundation for providing ongoing professional development opportunities for operational staff, but it is by no means exhaustive. Future research is needed to build upon the concepts developed by this piloted research. For example, future research could explore implementing the practice of designing ongoing professional development based on best practices and the coinciding elements. That is, future research could delve into the implementation of best practices in designing ongoing professional development for classified and non-instructional staff. This would involve examining the components and strategies involved in creating effective professional development plans tailored to the unique needs of business and operations personnel. Additionally, investigating the challenges faced by leaders in overcoming barriers to implementing these plans would provide valuable insights.

Further research will be important to explore this topic in more detail. Classified and non-instructional staff make up many roles in a school district. It would be interesting to discover the actual connection between specific professionally developed roles and student achievement. For example, it is known that bus drivers provide transportation access to students in urban school districts, but does the quality of service increase when the driver participates in continuous professional development? Assuming that continuous professional development is helpful, attention should then turn to the specific skills of focus in that professional development. Sessions may be job-specific, focusing on driving skills, achieving efficiency in bus routes, or other topics. Others may regard behavior-related skills, such as interacting and connecting with students, collaborating with staff, and so on. Subsequent recommendations for more professional development research were derived from the study's implications and results, and future research should examine the specific skills that would benefit different classified and non-instructional positions.

Another suggestion is to replicate this study in a different setting, for example in smaller, rural, or private school districts. Replicating the study in diverse settings, such as smaller, rural, or private school districts, would offer comparative perspectives on the effectiveness of professional development initiatives. By interviewing academic leaders responsible for providing professional development opportunities, researchers can gain insights into the similarities and differences in planning and executing professional development across various educational contexts.

Another recommendation is to conduct targeted sampling analysis. Conducting targeted sampling, focusing specifically on subgroups within classified and non-instructional staff, could yield nuanced findings regarding the impact of professional development. For example, limiting the survey to specific roles like secretaries or custodians may provide deeper insights into their perceptions and experiences with professional development. Furthermore, it would be interesting to interview academic leaders such as building administrators to provide additional insight from academic leaders who need to provide professional development opportunities for the classified staff in their school building. Would a professional plan for classified and non-instructional staff, created by academic leaders mirror or differ from the PD plan for teachers? Would the professional development plan developed by academic leaders be the same as a plan developed by business and operations leaders for classified and non-instructional staff? There was an attempt in this study to survey a diverse population of classified and non-instructional staff, but paraprofessionals represented the bulk of the responses. It would be intriguing to find out if the use of a targeted sample would have produced the same results. Would the outcomes remain the same, for instance, if the survey was limited to secretaries or custodians only.

For a deeper understanding of what makes effective professional development opportunities for business and operations workers, the study's methodologies may be inverted, with leaders being polled and classified employees taking part in focus groups. Inverting the methodologies by polling leaders and conducting focus groups with classified employees could offer complementary perspectives on professional development effectiveness. This approach would allow for a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions and experiences of both leaders and staff regarding the impact of professional development on organizational culture and strategies for navigating potential practical challenges such as a lack of time and the varied work schedules of staff members.

Regarding workplace culture, this study touched on how professional development affected the organizational culture of two urban Midwestern school districts, but the data did not dive deeply enough to render adequate results to determine what influence PD had on the workplace culture. Conducting research that centers on workplace culture might illuminate the significance and categories of professional growth that influence workplace cultures. Future research could focus on how professional development influences workplace culture within educational institutions. Investigating the relationship between professional growth opportunities and aspects of organizational culture, such as morale, collaboration, and innovation, would provide valuable insights into the broader impact of professional development initiatives.

Regarding practical concerns, future research could also investigate the specific nature of time-related barriers to continuous professional development for classified and non-instructional staff, as well as strategies by which leaders can circumvent time-related challenges to ensure that staff have access to professional development. In particular, studies examining the effectiveness of professional development delivered using different media (e.g., online, in-person) can yield

insight into modalities that are available. Studies examining varied group sizes can also offer guidance regarding whether offering professional development sessions at different times would effectively address a lack of consistency in staff members' work schedules. Of course, making professional development available does not mean that staff members will participate, and future research should examine whether incentives such as continuing education credits, salary increases, and college credit (culminating in associates' degrees) would promote active participation in continuous professional development for classified and non-instructional staff.

Finally, a larger sample size in the same settings could be used to validate or disprove the results of this study. Conducting studies with larger sample sizes within similar settings would enhance the validity and generalizability of the findings. By expanding the participant pool, researchers can further validate or refute the results obtained in this study, thereby contributing to the cumulative knowledge in the field of professional development for classified and non-instructional staff.

## Significance of the Study

Continuous improvement is necessary. To keep up to date and maintain a competitive advantage, professionals everywhere must prioritize lifelong development. Although training sessions may vary across roles and industries, the need for growth is the same. Any type of PD initiatives should go beyond the initial onboarding phase (Charles, 2023). A key component of lifetime learning for nurses is continuing professional development, which is also essential for maintaining nurses' current knowledge and abilities (Hallmark et al., 2021; Mlambo et al., 2021). The IT industry in India found that non-technical professional development improves effectiveness in a corporate environment (Chaudhary et al., 2023). In education, numerous regulations have been implemented to support teacher education and the advancement of current

knowledge to improve student outcomes (Sancar et al., 2021). With the knowledge from the body of research that supports the provision of professional development for teachers in education, faculty in higher education, and the business, engineering, and healthcare industries, it is strongly suggested to include classified and non-instructional staff in the conversation regarding professional development for growth opportunities. Overall, this study underscored the imperative of continuous improvement in professional development practices to keep pace with the rapidly evolving educational landscape. By prioritizing lifelong learning and growth, educational institutions can equip their staff with the necessary skills and competencies to navigate complex challenges and seize opportunities in the global economy.

A best practices professional development framework is crucial for demonstrating an employer's commitment to and investment in the advancement of its workforce. The adoption of best practices frameworks demonstrates organizational commitment and investment in the professional growth and development of staff members. Having a framework also helps with team development by aligning practices and expectations. By aligning practices, setting expectations, and fostering a culture of learning, educational institutions can enhance employee morale, retention, and overall organizational effectiveness. This alignment also ensures uniformity in business and operations by bringing all leaders up to speed on expectations and team development strategies. Consistency throughout the department, and district as well, is ensured by this alignment as it builds capabilities that serve the district's needs and strategic goals. Overall, this study is significant given that the findings highlight the need for inclusive professional development frameworks that cater to the diverse needs of classified and non-instructional staff. Implementing best practices frameworks ensures equitable access to growth opportunities, fostering a culture of learning and development for all employees.

Effective professional development frameworks require the active engagement and support of leadership. By prioritizing talent management and leadership development, educational leaders can cultivate a culture of continuous improvement and empower staff members to reach their full potential. The commitment of leadership to talent management is ultimately demonstrated by a professional development best practices framework, which also fosters alignment, encourages strategy, helps culture, enables measurement, and develops leadership abilities.

Development opportunities are generated purposefully rather than at random when using a best practices framework. Leaders who demonstrate a commitment to development also help to foster a development culture (Burns, 1978; Schein, 1993). Monitoring program efficacy, tracking participation, and quantifying results are all made possible with the appropriate framework and data could justify the continued investment in a PD program. By using the framework, leaders may develop a pipeline of future leaders as well as enhance their own leadership skills. Additionally, investing in professional development for classified and non-instructional staff contributes to the enhancement of workplace culture and student outcomes. By strengthening teamwork, recognizing employee value, and offering growth opportunities, educational institutions can create a conducive environment for student success and holistic staff development.

Classified and non-instructional staff in a K–12 school system may be impacted by a best practices professional development framework in several significant ways. School districts stand to gain from providing their classified and non-instructional staff with a continuous professional development program for business and operations. A PD framework would strengthen teamwork, model learning, recognize the value of every employee, attend to their needs, offer

growth opportunities, and eventually improve student results. Offering organized professional development opportunities demonstrates the district's commitment to investing in all employees, not just teachers. Morale and retention may increase as a result. Non-teaching staff can acquire the skills to be successful if the framework is tailored to their specific needs and offers development pertinent to their roles. These employees, like teachers, frequently have an ongoing desire to grow and improve. Professional development frameworks serve as a model for the value of lifelong learning and growth, inspiring individuals to continually enhance their skills and knowledge. By promoting a culture of continuous improvement, educational institutions foster a mindset of growth and innovation among staff members, ultimately benefiting student learning experiences.

## Conclusion

Overall results of this study showed that the classified and non-instructional staff and operational leaders had divergent views on the current state of professional development opportunities. Specifically, four common themes emerged from both groups: a) ongoing delivery, b) relevant and customizable, c) leadership modeling, and d) blended delivery. More specifically, the first theme revealed the importance of an ongoing development integrated into the work of business and operations staff members rather than one-and-done training. The second theme indicated the need for more relevant and customizable training to provide skills to update and hone specific skills related to job roles rather than generic, one-size-fits-all training. The third theme showed the importance of leadership modeling to demonstrate, participate in, and reinforce the importance of ongoing, relevant, and customizable training. Finally, the fourth theme revealed the significance of blended, accessible, and flexible delivery processes to accommodate employees' schedules, capture a large virtual audience, and encourage

relationship-building through face-to-face interaction. Each theme represented the most efficient course of action toward the desired state of a best practice framework for professional development. Additionally, all results validated what is already known about professional development opportunities for teachers and what is not known about professional development possibilities for classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations.

The results of this study aligned with the adult learning theory (Knowles, 1978) and transformation leadership theory (Burns, 1978). Overall, the strong desires for relevant, practical, customized, and sustained professional development opportunities expressed in both data sources clearly resonate with foundational assumptions of adult learning theory and transformational leadership theory. Classified and non-instructional staff desire relevant PD opportunities, and leaders desire to offer such PD; however, the gaps between present methods and best practices for adult education are revealed by the areas of disconnect that were identified.

Overall, professional development must be a continual, needs-driven process that is inclusive and facilitated through diverse and flexible training experiences. Both staff and leaders spoke about the need to provide business and operations staff members with ongoing development, relevant and customizable (tailored) training, modeling of leadership development, and a blend of virtual and in-person delivery platforms. These elements make up the best practice framework for leaders to provide professional development opportunities to classified and non-instructional staff. Yet, document reviews revealed there was a disconnection between the current tactical PD offerings and the professional development framework developed in this study.

The key findings of this study filled the gap in the literature about professional development practices for classified and non-instructional staff and expose the need for leaders

to reimagine strategies for providing their staff with growth opportunities. Although there was a strong desire for continuous and embedded PD, the training offerings examined herein misaligned with the empowering, culture-oriented training approaches that leaders discussed. The study found that employees were dissatisfied with limited, inconsistent, and irrelevant professional development opportunities, which made a best practices framework imperative for professional development for classified and non-instructional staff. Based on the findings, traditional mindsets and PD practices hindered development and prevented progress of ongoing, relevant, and customizable training.

Although this study showed the significant benefits of establishing a best practices professional development framework for classified and non-instructional personnel, school systems sometimes overlook the development of these essential staff members. Classified and non-instructional staff members are more driven, cooperative, and dedicated to the district's success when they are viewed as respected professionals and provided with regular opportunities to expand their knowledge and abilities. Students' educational experiences are enhanced when every member of the school staff works as a cohesive, high-achieving team committed to ongoing development.

It is the responsibility of leaders in business and operations to support inclusive, staff-specific PD frameworks that are tailored to the district's needs. Changes in culture and resources allotted for staff development serve to reaffirm the importance of human capital when the superintendent, school board, and other district leaders see development as a strategic goal. The first step in creating an environment that supports growth is for all district leaders to sincerely collaborate with classified and non-instructional staff, soliciting their opinions on a regular basis regarding their areas of need for improvement.

Teachers cannot drive excellence alone. The combined strength of all school personnel will be tapped into through updated staff development strategies. Students should be supported in their accomplishments by a cohesive community. The results of this study need to force districts across the country to reevaluate their presumptions on the capacity of their classified and non-instructional staff. With shared commitment to nurturing professional growth, districts will elevate performance and outcomes to new heights. The time to act on adopting a best practices professional development framework that is inclusive of classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations is now.

## Personal Reflection

Professional development in business and operations should be meaningful for classified and non-instructional workers as well as feasible for leaders. The goal of the current study was to close this gap in the literature by identifying effective methods for developing non-academic staff. The results of the study emerged from the analysis of survey data from classified and non-instructional staff, data from a focus group interview with business and operations leaders, as well as a review of documents submitted by leaders that detailed opportunities for staff training or obstacles that stood in the way of staff training. I decided to use the survey to get as many staff viewpoints as possible, and I selected a focus group interview to gain a deeper knowledge of the benefits and barriers of professional development from the leaders' perspective. The document analysis served as an artifact of what professional development was offered or lacking.

Conducting this research has been a tremendous learning experience. I learned so much about creating a literature review. It was initially difficult for me to narrow my research topic and also separate my experiences and feelings about the topic. I finally drilled down to my primary focus of including classified and non-instructional staff in the conversation about

professional development when I did not see them in the literature around the subject. I then learned to gather and interpret data along with the process of methodology. Each stage of the dissertation process was detailed and came with its own challenges. I learned to adapt and pivot when things did not go as planned.

This grounded theory research process has affected me personally more than it has professionally. I gained knowledge through surveying classified and non-instructional staff along with a deeper awareness from focus group leaders of the importance of having an opportunity to grow. I wish that I had also interviewed classified and non-instructional staff to allow them to share their stories and feelings about professional development. Nonetheless, I found the insights gained from interviewing leaders were critical to understanding the current PD program and potential barriers to providing classified and non-instructional staff meaningful professional development opportunities.

To complete this process did not come without limitations and challenges. I had many long and sleepless nights, and I questioned my ability to comprehend the path before me. I added such a small perspective to a massive field of literature, and there is still so much to learn about best practices for a professional development framework. In the end, it was all worth it to shine a light on our classified and non-instructional staff and bring attention to this important topic.

## Final Thoughts

As I reflect on this process of exploring a best practices professional development framework for classified and non-instructional staff, I am tremendously grateful. I must thank everyone who took part in my study and freely shared their experiences and perspectives. Your insights formed the foundation of this work. Additionally, I want to express my sincere gratitude

to my instructors, my dissertation chair, and my committee members for guiding, pushing, and encouraging me throughout the process.

I hope this dissertation offers a helpful foundation for future researchers to build upon. There is still much to be learned about effective professional development for these essential groups. Continue to add the importance of developing classified and non-instructional staff to the literature; the impact of your contribution to this subject might be enormous. Take an open and honest approach to the study. Remember to be patient with your progress and do not go it alone; you will need a team of people to assist you along your journey. This was only the start. It is now your turn to carry this conversation about developing non-teaching staff forward.

Finally, I am grateful for the chance to concentrate my research in an area of passion and meaning. Despite the difficulties throughout this process, it has been incredibly rewarding. I am honored and humbled to contribute a small piece to a larger field. I hope that this work honors the classified and non-instructional staff who do so much for our schools daily. I hope the results of this study get us one step closer to providing them with the equitable and empowering professional development they deserve. There is so much work ahead, and I am happy to join you in the journey. I am optimistic that, as a result of this study, leaders of large, urban Midwestern K-12 school districts will make professional development practices more equitable by ensuring that the staff responsible for creating the conditions for student learning and achievement have the opportunity to learn, grow, and get better too.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

IRB LETTERS OF PERMISSION

**2023-268 - Modification: Modification**

do-not-reply@cayuse.com
To: Delrica Grubbs; Jane Beese

Thu 1/11/2024 9:32 AM

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

Jan 11, 2024 9:32:37 AM EST

Rodney Rock
Teacher Ed and Leadership St

Re: Modification - 2023-268 I Want to Learn, Grow, and Get Better Too: A Best Practice Framework for Professional Development for Classified and Business and Operations Staff in an Urban K-12 Setting

Dear Dr. Rodney Rock:

Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board has rendered the decision below for I Want to Learn, Grow, and Get Better Too: A Best Practice Framework for Professional Development for Classified and Business and Operations Staff in an Urban K-12 Setting

Decision: Approved

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Institutional Review Board and may not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly
reported to the IRB.

The IRB would like to extend its best wishes to you in the conduct of this study.

Sincerely,
Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
1 Tressel Way, Youngstown, OH 44555

January 11, 2024

Jane Beese
Teacher Education and Leadership Studies

Re: Exempt – Modification – 2023-268 I Want to Learn, Grow, and Get Better Too: A Best Practice Framework for Professional Development for Classified and Business Operations Staff in an Urban K-12 Setting

Dear Dr. Jane Beese:

Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board has rendered the decision below for I Want to Learn, Grow, and Get Better Too: A Best Practice Framework for Professional Development for Classified and Business Operations Staff in an Urban K-12 Setting

Decision: Approved

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Institutional Review Board and may not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly reported to the IRB.

The IRB would like to extend its best wishes to you in the conduct of this study.

Sincerely,

Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board=5tw

Youngstown State University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity and/or expression, disability, age, religion or veteran/military status in its programs or activities. Please visit www.ysu.edu/ada-accessibility for contact information for persons designated to handle questions about this policy. | www.ysu.edu

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT TO FOCUS GROUP

Dear (Participant), (Print Name) _____

I am currently a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at Youngstown State University. I am conducting a study on developing a best practice framework for providing ongoing professional development opportunities for classified and business and operations staff in a K-12 setting. I am asking you to participate in the leadership focus group interviews and document review as a part of my research study. By participating in this study, you are contributing to research that will fill a gap in the literature concerning ongoing professional development for classified and non-instructional staff and the leaders' role in providing professional development opportunities.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to first sign a consent form and then participate in a 60-minute focus group interview. The interview will be virtually recorded via Zoom. To protect the identities of the participants, demographic, and interview data are stored in a file that is only accessible to the researcher. Confidentiality will always be maintained by using an alias and omitting details that might be used to identify you. The researcher will store all data in password-protected files and delete study data after three years. There is no foreseeable emotional or physical risk to the participant study. After the video recordings have been transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review the data prior to my study submission. This will ensure that I have accurately represented your comments.

In addition to the interview, I am also asking you to submit an artifact for document review to be reviewed by the researcher that lists the training opportunities you have provided your staff. This can also be in the form of a calendar. If no such list or calendar exists, you are welcome to provide a statement or list of barriers that hinder your ability to provide ongoing professional development opportunities to your staff.

Participation is voluntary and refusal to participate or your withdrawal from the project at any time will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You are free to share your views on professional development only as you feel comfortable in a public setting. You are also free to opt out of this study at any time that you feel uncomfortable.

I hope that you will consider contacting me by email at dgrubbs@student.ysu.edu or by phone at 330-xxx-xxxx to participate in my study. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, feel free to contact the Dissertation Chair, Dr. Rodney Rock at rrock@ysu.edu.

By signing and dating here, I agree to participate in the study,

X _____ _____

By signing and dating here, I agree to have my interview digitally recorded,

X _____ _____

Delrica Grubbs
Doctoral Candidate, Youngstown State University

APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE FOR FOCUS GROUP

Please complete the demographic questionnaire below without naming your district or department.

Please write, type, or highlight your responses and email the completed form to xxx@student.ysu.edu.

1. Please provide an alias of your choice _____
2. Are you a leader in one of the three largest districts in Ohio _____YES _____NO
3. Your current title: Chief Executive Director Director Manager Supervisor
4. Number of years in your current role _____
5. Number of years in your current district _____
6. Total number of years you have worked in education _____
7. Number of urban districts you have worked in besides your current district _____
8. Name any classified, business and operations, or other roles in the district _____

   _____
9. Age range _____25-39 _____40-49 _____50-59 _____60-over
10. Gender _____
11. Highest degree obtained _____
12. Certifications or Licenses held _____

    _____
13. Types of professional development you have had _____

    _____

    _____
14. Any additional information you would like to provide _____

    _____

APPENDIX D

LETTER OF SUPPORT

Date

Youngstown State University
One University Plaza
Youngstown, Ohio 44555

**RE: IRB Letter of Support for**
Delrica Grubbs, Doctoral Researcher

Dear Institutional Review Board Chair and Members:
I am writing this letter of support for Delrica Grubbs. It is our intention to support Delrica Grubbs' research as described below.

**Research Overview**

1. **Project Summary:**
   A grounded theory in qualitative research on creating a framework for providing ongoing professional development to classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations in an urban, K-12 setting. This study will close the gap in the research surrounding equitable opportunities for staff to receive growth opportunities through training and professional development.

2. **Objectives:**
   The purpose of this study is to develop a framework for providing ongoing professional development opportunities to classified and operations staff in an urban, K-12 setting. To determine key elements of this framework, a survey will be administered to classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations in the three largest urban, K-12 districts in Ohio. Seven leaders in business and operations across the three districts will participate in two focus group interviews. The goal is to contribute this framework to the research as a point of reference for leaders to provide ongoing professional development opportunities to their classified and non-instructional staff in business and operations.

3. **Background & Rationale**
   Professional development (PD) is encouraged and calendared for teachers and building administrators; however, their training is often not relevant to classified and non-instructional support staff. Professional development days are normal business days for non-classroom and other operational staff. Unfortunately, training is often punitive when provided to this demographic and rarely used as an ongoing opportunity for growth. School districts need operational support staff to support their academic partners and to create conditions for student learning and achievement. The development of a framework for professional development will give leaders in business and operations a chance to provide ongoing growth opportunities to their staff.

Sincerely,

APPENDIX E

SURVEY QUESTIONS

***Section One***

Your role/department in the district (dropdown)

- buildings and grounds (maintenance)
- bus driver/aide/mechanic
- custodial services
- food service (kitchen worker)
- human resources
- procurement
- safety and security
- secretary
- other (classified or business and operations)

- How long have you worked in your district?
    - Under 1 year – 4 years
    - 5 years – 9 years
    - 10 years – 14 years
    - 15 years – 19 years
    - 20 years – 24 years
    - Over 25 years

- How long have you been in your current role?
    - Under 1 year – 4 years
    - 5 years – 9 years
    - 10 years – 14 years
    - 15 years – 19 years
    - 20 years – 24 years
    - Over 25 years

- Have you worked in any other classified or business and operations role in the district?
    - Yes
    - No

- Your level(s) of training
    - Certificate or Licensure
    - Degree
    - Departmental (job-specific) Training
    - Ongoing refresher training
    - Orientation
    - Professional Development days
    - Union training

***Section Two***

As it pertains to professional development… (The scale range will include Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, and Agree.

- Our district offers enough training to keep my growth and skill up to date.
- My direct manager enables me to learn and develop new skills.
- My leader encourages professional development for growth in my department.
- In the last month, I have had opportunities to learn and grow.
- I feel that I am growing professionally.
- My leader is responsible for providing professional development opportunities throughout the school year.
- Professional Development is provided ongoing or continuously in my department
- Professional Development is provided as a means of punishment in my department.
- Professional Development is provided as a means of growth in my department.
- Professional Development helps to improve workplace culture in my department.

***Section Three***

Rate the following experiences pertaining to professional development (Ranging from Very Poor at -2, Poor at -1, Good at +1 to Very Good at +2).

- Leadership's efforts in providing professional development or growth opportunities.
- Professional Development offerings available to staff.
- Leadership's support in my personal and professional growth and development.
- My overall experiences with professional development.
- My attitudes about mandatory professional development.

- Challenges or barriers to participating in professional development
    - Time
    - Leader Mindset
    - Cost
    - Work hours
    - Platform (in-person or virtual)
    - Other

- Your learning style (check all that apply)
    - Auditory (listening/speaking, lectures/videos)
    - Intrapersonal (independent learning)
    - Interpersonal (group learning)
    - Kinesthetic (by doing)
    - Linguistic (reading/note-taking)
    - Logical (steps/methods)
    - Visual (pictures/examples)

- Ideal training platform
    - In-person only (workshop, lecture)
    - Virtual only (virtual platforms, webinars)
    - In-person and Virtual

***Section Four***

Training you received at work

- Communication
- Conflict Resolution
- Customer Service
- De-escalation
- Diversity, Equity, Inclusion
- Job-specific
- Leadership
- Managing Change
- Problem-Solving
- Social Emotional Learning (SEL)
- Stress Management
- Team Building (Bonding)
- Time Management
- Other

Training you would like to have

- Communication
- Conflict Resolution
- Customer Service
- De-escalation
- Diversity, Equity, Inclusion
- Job-specific
- Leadership
- Managing Change
- Problem-Solving
- Social Emotional Learning (SEL)
- Stress Management
- Team Building (Bonding)
- Time Management
- Other

Add the type and amount of hard skills (job-embedded) you have received at work

| Short answer |
| --- |
| |

Hard-skill *(job-related)* training should be offered _____ throughout the school year

- 1-2 times
- 3-4 times
- 5-6 times
- 7-8 times
- 9-10 times
- More than 10 times

Soft-skill *(how to work with and interact with others)* you have received at work

| Short answer |
| --- |
| |

Soft-skill *(how to work with and interact with others)* training should be offered _____ throughout the school year.

- 1-2 times
- 3-4 times
- 5-6 times
- 7-8 times
- 9-10 times
- More than 10 times

Short answer for responses marked as "other." DO NOT add personal identifiers such as your name, age, or district. N/A if noting to add.

| Short answer |
| --- |
| |

Privacy Statement
To maintain privacy, I did not include any personal identifiers such as my name, age, or district in any open fields.

- Click here to confirm personal identifiers where not included

***Survey Conclusion Verbiage***

Captcha verification I Submission Page

By submitting your survey, you are consenting to participate in the study.

| ☐ I'm not a robot |
| --- |
| |

"Thank you for participating in this survey study to develop a best practice framework for professional development for classified and business and operations staff in K-12 settings. Your input is appreciated!"

APPENDIX F

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**Focus Group Interview**

1. What is the purpose of providing professional development for classified and business and operations staff?

2. As a leader, what professional development topics do you believe are important to classified staff success?

3. Which professional development platform do you prefer for classified staff: in-person only, virtual only, or both?

4. What is the role of a leader in providing professional development offerings to classified staff in business and operations?

5. In what ways does providing ongoing professional development to classified staff affect the workplace culture? How do classified staff contribute to the culture of learning in schools?

6. Professional development is often calendared for academic departments but not for business and operations. What are some barriers, challenges, or limitations to providing ongoing professional development for classified and business and operations staff?

7. How does providing professional development opportunities for classified and non-instructional staff influence student learning and achievement?

8. What do you believe are the best practices for providing professional development for classified staff? What should a professional development framework include or consider?