Grassroots Professional Learning: The Homegrown and Human Dimensions of Teacher Learning

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GRASSROOTS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING:
THE HOMEGROWN AND HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF TEACHER LEARNING

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University in partial fulfilment
of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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May 2020

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

We hereby approve the Dissertation

GRASSROOTS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING:
THE HOMEGROWN AND HUMAN DIMENSIONS
OF TEACHER LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

GRASSROOTS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING:
THE HOMEGROWN AND HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF TEACHER LEARNING

by Heather A. Frank Matteo

This qualitative study was prompted by the current climate of teacher accountability and educational reform efforts focused on teacher quality and effectiveness in the U.S. Initiatives, at both the national and state levels, reflect top-down professional development policies that tend to prioritize one-size-fits-all approaches to teacher development and ultimately serve to deprofessionalize teachers. As a result, little attention has been paid to understanding teachers’ professional learning in a grassroots sense. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how a group of elementary school teachers of literacy engaged collectively in grassroots professional learning in the context of top-down professional development regulations.

Building off the literature on grassroots social and economic development theories and grassroots movements, grassroots professional learning emphasizes highly contextualized and collaborative forms of professional learning that are embedded in teachers’ everyday practice and can be understood as operating at the most grounded level of a school organization in relation to administrators and policy makers. Social learning theory framed my study, and key concepts like grassroots, distributed leadership, and teacher agency offered different vantage points on a group of teachers’ professional learning processes and practices. Participants included an already-in-place group of four elementary school teachers who engaged in collective professional learning with each other. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews as well as teacher-created documents and audio recordings of group get-togethers. Iterative coding methods were used to generate categories and themes.
Four findings about grassroots professional learning emerged from my analysis. *Putting down our roots* focused on how this group of teachers developed, navigated, and nurtured their relationships with each other. *Coming (and staying) together* focused on the well-being of the group itself. *Getting messy with our learning* described the interplay between the individual and the group in terms of the learning the teachers engaged in jointly and as individuals. *Being savvy about institutional structures and processes* captured how teachers in this group maximized their own learning within—and even because of—these constraints.

My study contributed a usefully messy and nuanced characterization of professional learning that is grounded in teachers’ day-to-day responsibilities, practices, and personal relationships. Given that the findings of this study highlighted the context-specific and highly personal dimensions of teachers’ learning, grassroots learning should not be considered a prescription for organic professional learning in schools. Rather, informally recognizing and supporting teachers’ homegrown and effective professional learning is an important step in pushing back against systems and policies that measure professional development in more standardized ways.

*Keywords*: education, grassroots professional learning, informal professional development, teacher professional development, teacher learning, social learning theory, distributed leadership, agency
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It has always been both a professional and personal dream of mine to complete a doctoral program. Trying to balance a career, doctoral work, and family was not without its challenges, and I would not have been able to embark on this journey and complete this work without the support of so many people in my life.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the unwavering support of my dissertation chair, Dr. Michele Knobel. I am grateful for her depth of knowledge, our conversations, the endless Google Docs comments awaiting me in the morning, and her investment in me. Even when I felt as though this program and its requirements might break me, she always seemed to know how far (and hard) she could push me, offering guidance, resources, and a good laugh. I could never thank her enough for always hearing me out and pushing my ideas and me further.

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I am forever grateful for the teachers who participated in my study. Elise, Emma, Kristen, and Mia contributed more to this study than I could have imagined when I was developing my proposal. I have learned so much through our conversations and Google Docs comment threads and continue to be astounded by their contributions. When I initially contacted this group about participation in my study, I explained that I wanted to make a space for the voices of teachers who were invested in their own professional learning. I sincerely hope I have honored the work they do each day to support their students and each other.

I would be remiss if I did not take the opportunity to thank my mother, Arlene Frank, for her tireless support and sacrifice over the years. She has always been my biggest cheerleader and continues to be to this day. I hope I have made you proud, Mom.

My husband Andrew and I decided in a Trader Joe’s parking lot one Friday night that we were both going to apply to the TETD doctoral program. Although there were certainly moments of frustration (e.g., the times when I would be working on a class assignment and he would be napping on the couch), I could not imagine completing this program without him by my side. His humor got me through the lows, and his endless encouragement kept me going. Thank you, Andrew, for making the space for my dream in our relationship and showing our girls what unconditional support looks like. I am so grateful to know where you fall theoretically and in reality.

Finally, Grace and Ella, one day I will tell stories of conducting my study and writing my dissertation on borrowed time—between your feedings, during your naps, the late nights, and the early mornings. As much as I embarked on this journey for myself, this is also for you. If you
learn anything from my journey, may it be this: Dream big, work hard, and fight for what is important to you.
DEDICATION

To Grace and Ella.

May you always remember that a woman’s true strength comes from her smarts.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the current U.S. climate of teacher accountability, wherein teachers’ classroom performances are evaluated regularly by supervisors or administrators, issues of teacher quality and effectiveness are at the forefront of educational reform efforts. The U.S. Department of Education’s (2009) Race to the Top Grant Fund provided incentives to encourage and reward states that raised student achievement and promoted innovation in education. Specifically, this grant program encouraged the use of student growth measurements, teacher evaluation systems, and teachers’ annual evaluation as ways to improve teacher effectiveness. Taking just one U.S. state as an exemplar, the New Jersey legislature unanimously approved the Teacher Effectiveness and Accountability for the Children of New Jersey (TEACHNJ) Act in 2012, with the goal of raising student test scores and improving instruction. In addition to tying decisions about tenure to teacher evaluations, TEACHNJ also outlines specific requirements for a new teacher evaluation system. To assist school districts in implementing this new law, the New Jersey Department of Education (2014a) enacted AchieveNJ, a teacher evaluation and support system.

Interestingly, one of the AchieveNJ regulations ties teachers’ professional development to supervisors’ evaluations as a key method for helping teachers improve their classroom practice (NJDOE, 2014a). Designed in 2013 to replace the previously required 100 professional development hours over a five-year period, the regulation requires all New Jersey teachers to complete 20 hours of professional development annually that are aligned with their evaluation results and to outline the goals of those learning activities in an individual professional development plan (NJDOE, 2014b). This state-mandated personal professional development plan is generated in consultation with a supervisor (i.e., a principal or department supervisor) and
specifies the goals for professional learning and related activities that an individual teacher will engage in during a school year (e.g., goal: to use formative assessment data to drive writing instruction; activities: collaborate with colleagues and literacy coach to create and implement student feedback forms). As part of this requirement, teachers must select goals for their annual professional development plan that meet the New Jersey Department of Education’s (2014b) AchieveNJ requirements: (1) a goal tied to that teacher’s most recent annual performance evaluation, (2) one goal reflecting the teacher’s role as a collaborative professional learning team member, and (3) one goal that reflects school and/or district improvement goals. For example, an elementary classroom teacher might attend a half-day district workshop on technology integration in writing workshop as a way to meet the district’s improvement goal to integrate a new learning management system into writing instruction. Additionally, although the policy references job-embedded professional development, it also encourages districts to hire and use the expertise of external professional developers to support teachers’ learning needs (NJDOE, 2014c). A weakness of policies, like AchieveNJ, is that they tend to be top-down in nature, which often limits teachers’ agency with respect to their own their learning (e.g., Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Leana, 2011; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010; Mehta, 2013; National Council of Teachers of English, 2019). In other words, top-down professional development regulations that focus on accountability can deprofessionalize teachers. In short, the AchieveNJ teacher evaluation and support system reflects a trend that has been, and continues to be, representative of professional development policies across the U.S. that collectively aim at deprofessionalizing teachers—as explained in more detail below—by mandating and officially recognizing only particular kinds of professional learning (Darling-
Hammond et al., 2009; Jaquith, Mindich, Wei, & Darling-Hammond, 2010; NCTE, 2019; Shakman, Zweig, Bocola, Lacireno-Paquet, & Bailey, 2016).

Despite a long history of academic study of and recommendations for improving approaches to teachers’ professional development (e.g., Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; DeSimone, 2009, 2011; DeSimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Hawley & Valli, 1999; NCTE, 2019; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007), many professional development regulations in the United States actually limit teachers’ choices with regard to their own learning and professional growth. For instance, discourse about professional learning is often couched in terms that assume it is necessarily classroom directed. In other words, administrators typically prescribe professional learning activities for teachers to help them “fix” their teaching in some way in order to improve instruction, and ultimately student achievement, such as requiring all teachers to attend a workshop on word study instruction, whether these teachers need such a workshop or not (see Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Jaquith et al., 2010; NCTE, 2019; Shakman et al., 2016; Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010). In short, a key problem facing teachers right now in the United States is that professional learning activities continue, in the main, to be governed by policy and administrative directives rather than to be self-directed learning that targets specific teaching needs or enriches existing instructional practices (Jaquith et al., 2010; NJDOE, 2014b; Shakman et al., 2016).

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how a group of elementary school teachers engaged collectively in grassroots professional learning with each other. This research aimed to challenge current top-down, one-size-fits-all approaches to teacher development by
providing insight into how a group of literacy teachers identified their own learning needs and engaged in professional learning. The context for my study was grounded in explicit recognition that many teachers do invest in their own ongoing professional learning in ways that truly benefit their students and schools (cf. Bohny, 2017; Bostock, Lisi-Neumann, & Collucci, 2016; Plein, 2018; Jusinski, 2018a; Jusinski, 2018b). My focus on grassroots learning explicitly recognized the connections and networks that often are a key part of the ways in which groups of teachers learn (and how they regularly learn from each other). This focus also accounted for the immediacy and situatedness of much of this learning (as argued later in this paper) and called for an in-depth study rather than a broad-brush-stroked one. My interest in grassroots professional learning stemmed from my own professional experiences in which self-directed teachers worked collectively to learn more about literacy instruction and practices in spite of teacher accountability and effectiveness policies. I argue that examining how groups of teachers engaged in grassroots professional learning might help administrators and policy makers identify principles they can draw on to rethink what professional learning looks like and whether a formal, top-down approach is the best vehicle for upskilling teachers. Thus, my study was framed by this question: In what ways does a group of elementary school teachers engage in grassroots professional learning with each other?

**What Prompted This Study for Me Personally**

As a former public elementary school classroom teacher with over 15 years of experience, I have encountered a variety of professional learning activities, initiatives, and mandates. I have also been involved in facilitating professional learning for my colleagues at the grade, school, and district levels. Since the enactment of TeachNJ, I witnessed and experienced the frustration my colleagues and I often felt toward these mandates. In the summer of 2016, I
was invited by my district’s literacy consultant to apply for a three-day, literacy-focused Coaching Co-Op. The co-op was open to classroom teachers who demonstrate leadership in their schools as well as instructional coaches, supervisors, and administrators. Facilitated by two literacy consultants, the co-op was designed to help participants develop an understanding of literacy leadership. Over the course of the sessions, I worked with the literacy consultants, classroom teachers, supervisors, and administrators to learn about research and practices related to coaching, instructional coaching in schools, balanced literacy, and effective professional learning. We had opportunities to collaborate with each other, practice new instructional and coaching strategies, and construct something that would be useful for us in our respective roles, such as planning tools for teachers or model lessons.

Looking back on the experience, I continue to be impressed by the professionalism and commitment of the teachers in the group—individuals who committed their own time to grow professionally and ultimately bring about change in their schools without being in any formal administrator-assigned development role (e.g., supervisor, curriculum director). It was after the literacy co-op that I began to rethink my role and agency as a classroom teacher. Through my interactions with literacy teachers who were working in their schools to create meaningful and authentic professional learning with their colleagues, I was curious as to what they were doing in their schools and why they were doing it. As part of pursuing this interest, I completed a review of the qualitative empirical literature, and I was surprised to find that very little research to date focused on my conceptualization of the work that classroom teachers were doing as they engaged in their own professional learning in their respective schools. Thus, the idea of grassroots professional learning was born, and I was eager to learn more about the classroom teachers engaging in what I consider to be seriously important learning work.
Conclusion

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the problem underpinning this study in terms of current professional development policies and initiatives. These initiatives tend to focus on teacher accountability, deprofessionalize teachers, and overlook the homegrown and human dimensions of teacher learning. Despite these initiatives and policies, grassroots professional learning experiences are being generated purposely by and through the day-to-day work of teachers. Chapter 2 provides an overview of social learning theory, which frames this study. I also discuss how concepts like grassroots, distributed leadership, and teacher agency offered different vantage points of an already-in-place group of teachers’ professional learning process and practices. Chapter 3 presents the research design and methods used to better understand how a group of teachers engaged in professional learning with each other. In Chapter 4, I present and discuss the findings that grew out of my analysis of the data. My four findings included putting down our roots, coming (and staying) together, getting messy with our learning, and being savvy about institutional structures and process. Chapter 5 discusses my findings regarding the ways in which a group of teachers engaged in grassroots professional learning as well as the implications of this study on research and practice.

In summary, the purpose of this paper is to present and discuss the findings of a doctoral study designed to help readers better understand how teachers engage in homegrown professional learning. Results or outcomes, I believe, can contribute to our understanding of how teachers engage in professional learning with others so we might begin to rethink formal approaches to professional development and teacher learning.

In Chapter 2, I overview the theory framing this research study as well as discuss the literature highlighting the concepts of grassroots, distributed leadership, and teacher agency.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter begins with a history of grassroots as a descriptor that informs my subsequent discussion of grassroots professional learning. In the next section, I overview the qualitative empirical literature on teacher-centric professional learning for literacy instruction to date. I then outline the framing theory for my proposed study, which incorporates John Seely Brown’s work on social learning theory (e.g., Brown & Adler, 2008) and draws on distributed leadership and teacher agency as key organizing concepts.

**Grassroots as a Useful Concept**

**History of Grassroots as a Descriptor**

Historically in academia, the idea of grassroots as an explanatory device was taken up in development fields to talk about more localized forms of economic and social development that were grounded in and generated by the lives impacted most by such development (cf. Atteh, 1999; “Grassroots Development,” 1991; Mulwa, 1988; Stevens & Morris, 2001; Wilson, 1996). The descriptor grassroots development as a term referring to a form of small-scale and decentralized development is often said to have first appeared in the 1970s (Stevens & Morris, 2001). Grassroots development differs from the top-down development often imposed by aid agencies and nongovernmental organizations on populations in need of economic support or social support services (Briggs & Sharp, 2004; “Grassroots Development,” 1991; Wilson, 1996). This approach typically took into account the specific local context, drew on the population’s knowledge through their experiences in this context, and aimed at providing the population with ownership of and direct personal investment in the development process and strategies (Atteh, 1999; Briggs & Sharp, 2004; “Grassroots Development,” 1991; Mulwa, 1988; Wilson, 1996). In short, a grassroots approach to development was typically marked by the
development of new knowledge and skills in the context of a local community’s own development priorities and experiences (Mulwa, 1988). One example of successful grassroots development is illustrated by an adult literacy project piloted in Machakos, Kenya, in 1975 (Mulwa, 1988). Tasked with identifying the development needs of the people in the district, the first full-time development coordinator from the Catholic Diocese of Machakos created a community survey to identify the needs of the individuals in the diocese. Based on survey data collected during three months by local teams of nurses, teachers, and priests, adult literacy was identified as a priority need, and a literacy program was started. During literacy classes, the villagers’ discussions about the issues raised in the community survey became a jumping-off point for community members to learn how to construct solutions to the socioeconomic problems they faced. As a result, other socioeconomic projects began, including cooperative farming, cooperative grain stores, women’s handcrafts, primary health care, and consumer shops for farmers.

Underlying this approach is the assumption that if change begins with individuals, they can learn to be agents in their community, which, in turn, can lead to cumulative community empowerment (Stevens & Morris, 2001). Thus, grassroots development theories emphasize the importance of local context, scale, and bottom-up, collective decision making (Dixon & McGregor, 2011). Scholars argue that building development projects from the inside out requires developing a local group’s self-efficacy and connectedness to the larger community (Mulwa, 1988; Stevens & Morris, 2001; Wilson, 1996). They also argue that this kind of grassroots approach augurs much better for the sustainability of the project over time (Dixon & McGregor, 2011; Mulwa, 1988; Stevens & Morris, 2001; Wilson, 1996). Successful
participation in grassroots movements cannot be accomplished without community members sharing the leadership, planning, decision making, and implementation of the project work. Subsequently, talk of grassroots movements was taken up in urban and activist literature to describe a group of people working together to enact change at the local, national, or international level (e.g., Baumgardner & Richards, 2005; Bullard, 1993; Bullard & Johnson, 2000; Hall, 2016; Harris, 2015; Johnson, 2005; Khor, 1999; Parker, 2011). Historically, grassroots movements in these spheres of social action have emerged in response to “practices, policies, and conditions that residents have judged to be unjust, unfair, and illegal” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2005, p. 557). Simply put, grassroots movements in urban and activist projects also involve people mobilizing around issues directly affecting them, with the goal of reforming or reinventing existing structures.

More recently, social media has been used as a tool to enact change by grassroots activists. Activists of the Black Lives Matter movement, a movement focused on dismantling mass incarceration and police violence in communities of color, have used social media—Twitter and Facebook in particular—to mobilize individuals to action throughout the United States and also to report on incidents of police brutality in real time (Cobb, 2016; Hall, 2016; Harris, 2015). With the aid of social media (and the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter), Black Lives Matter activists have adopted a group-centered model of leadership, in which a bottom-up approach is led by ordinary individuals (Cobb, 2016; Hall, 2016; Harris, 2015). This broad-based approach fosters the participation of individuals with varied and complex experiences so that the group does not become dependent upon one individual to organize and lead participants. In summary, grassroots as a descriptor captures how a group of individuals demonstrate agency through their pursuit of bottom-up change in their local contexts. It is this
history that informs my conceptualization of grassroots professional learning, which I discuss in the following section.

**Grassroots Professional Learning**

Perhaps less lofty in terms of goals, academic thinking about teaching and professional learning in the context of literacy instruction has much to gain from coupling professional learning with the concept of grassroots so that the work of teachers can be understood as operating at the basic, most grounded level of the school organization especially in relation to policy makers and administrators. This coupling emphasizes highly contextualized and collaborative forms of professional learning in which everyday teachers pool their expertise and knowledge to engage in discourse and learning activities related to their daily practice (Baker-Doyle, 2017; Kyndt, Gijbels, Grosemans, & Donche, 2016; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; Taylor, Goeke, Klein, Onore, & Geist, 2011). By intentionally pursuing new learning in their professional contexts, teachers demonstrate agency—the capacity to act—engage in discourse, or even choose not to do something, to effect positive change in their teaching contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a; Gourd, 2015; Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2012). For example, upon recognizing that students struggle to transfer writing skills to other content areas, a group of teachers demonstrates agency by collectively examining the literacy skills they teach and creating lessons plans that will help them target those specific skills. Given the scope of literacy and the way in which it applies across content areas, grassroots professional learning works well with considerations of literacy instruction. For the purposes of my study, then, *grassroots professional learning* refers to the professional learning that is generated deliberately by and through the localized daily work of teachers.
When used in this context, *grassroots* captures how teachers are engaging explicitly in their own professional learning, often with the intention of enacting positive change in their schools parallel with those in “higher” positions of power who typically are mandating or enforcing professional learning and teacher accountability policies. Teachers who engage in grassroots professional learning—as I am defining it—often recognize issues concerning power and equity that exist in all school systems (Baker-Doyle, 2017). Like grassroots activists, these teachers often assume leadership roles by recognizing an area of need or improvement in their schools and acting to address or resolve the issue (Baker-Doyle, 2017; Danielson, 2006; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Thus, teachers are learning to be, or are practicing being, agents in their classrooms and schools.

Given this study’s focus on homegrown and organic professional learning, it is also important to situate this conceptualization of teacher learning in the existing body of literature on effective professional development. Ultimately, the goals of effective professional development, including the grassroots learning conceptualized in this report, involve growth in terms of teachers’ understandings, the application of new understandings and strategies in the classroom, and improvements in student learning (Desimone, 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Although professional development activities vary (i.e., formal, lecture-style workshops, webinars, coteaching and reflecting on lessons, etc.), scholars have long recognized the features of effective professional learning in schools (cf. Bates & Morgan, 2018; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2011; Garet et al., 2001; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Lieberman & Wood; 2001; NCTE, 2019). There is general consensus among researchers in terms of what makes professional development effective, and the following characteristics have informed my conceptualization of grassroots professional learning.
As identified in the academic literature, effective professional development (1) is content based, (2) involves active engagement, (3) involves teacher collaboration, (4) uses models, (5) provides coaching and support, (6) offers opportunities for feedback and reflection, and (7) is sustained over time (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a; Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; Desimone, 2011; Garet et al., 2001; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Lieberman & Wood; 2001; NCTE, 2019). In this conceptualization, teachers ground their learning in a specific content area (e.g., literacy) and how students learn that content and related skills (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2011; Garet et al., 2001). Effective professional development is also participatory: Teachers actively identify and explore their own learning needs and interests as those needs and interests pertain to local teaching contexts (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2011; Garet et al., 2001). Scholars posit that teachers must be actively engaged in order to connect their new understandings to their classroom practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Garet et al., 2001). Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2017) further suggest this link can be established through opportunities for teachers to try out new strategies related to what they are learning.

Third, teachers need to collaborate, and researchers recognize that effective collaboration is founded on trusting relationships (Bates & Morgan, 2018). Through collaborative relationships and spaces, teachers can tap into the expertise of others by sharing and coconstructing understandings and solving problems with each other (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a; Lieberman & Wood, 2001; NCTE, 2019). Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2017) suggest that, through this collaboration, teachers can improve instructional practices at their respective grade levels, within their department, or even in their school or district.
As described in the literature, embedded in effective professional development are various supports for teachers. One support is the use of models of practice (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), including lesson plans, student work samples, peer observations, and videos. Additionally, effective professional development includes opportunities for coaching and provides a space for teachers to consider, receive feedback on, and adapt practices (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Importantly, effective professional development that incorporates the aforementioned elements is sustained, so teachers have time to learn, practice, try out, and refine their instructional practices (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2011; Garet et al., 2001; Hawley & Valli, 1999).

In terms of learning, the concept of grassroots professional learning builds upon previous scholarship on teacher learning in the context of professional development. Scholars have long argued that knowledge is constructed collectively over time and involves purposeful inquiry into practice with a goal of bringing about change in classrooms and schools (e.g., Ball & Cohen, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999b; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010). In this view, teachers assume an activist role with a goal of “understanding, articulating, and ultimately altering practice and social relationships to bring about fundamental change in classrooms, schools, districts, programs, and professional organizations” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a, p. 279). In other words, teachers learn when they examine their own contexts—including students, classrooms, schools, and local curricula—with others with a goal of effecting change.

Therefore, scholars have encouraged the creation of professional learning communities and the like in which teachers meet regularly to systematically address problems of practice.
Advocates of this approach to teacher learning argue that professional learning communities offer teachers a sustained opportunity to learn that can lead to school improvement (DuFour, 2011; Lieberman & Miller, 2011). Researchers like Richard DuFour (2011) even go as far as to suggest that administrators embed this type of collaboration in the routines of schools. Unsurprisingly, the first standard in the New Jersey Department of Education Standards for Professional Development states that professional learning “occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment” (NJDOE, 2014c). Although the concept of learning communities is useful in theory, I argue that specific professional learning activities may be imposed on teachers in the guise of professional learning communities. Scholars also recognize professional learning communities are not without their limitations, including the creation of inauthentic teacher “teams,” micromanagement by administrators, and an emphasis on accountability rather than learning (DuFour, 2011; Lieberman & Miller, 2011). On the contrary, emphasizing learning in a grassroots way reminds researchers that teachers are doing it for themselves in the context of collaborative and organic networks. In fact, I propose that teachers engage in this learning through learning experiences grounded in their everyday teaching responsibilities.

Fundamental to the idea of grassroots professional learning are informal learning experiences—that is, learning activities for teachers that arise from and within their everyday work (see Baker-Doyle, 2017; Kyndt et al., 2016; Lohman, 2000; Schugurensky, 2000). I argue that through these activities, teachers learn about particular instructional strategies and approaches to literacy instruction. For instance, when collaboratively planning units of study for reading, teachers might learn how to tailor reading conferences and small group instruction to
better meet the needs of their students or how to align instruction with the unit goals in mind. Importantly, within this paradigm, these informal learning activities are deeply collaborative because through them teachers engage in learning about literacy practices with others while attempting to enact positive change in their schools. At the same time, leadership is not grounded in a specified role or designated for a single individual. Rather, it is stretched over the work of multiple individuals (Spillane, 2006; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; Spillane & Orlina, 2005). In summary, grassroots professional learning provides a teacher-centric way to think about professional learning that sharply contrasts with mandated professional development. However, as I argue in the next section, the qualitative research to date has paid little attention to teachers’ grassroots professional learning.

**Teacher-Centric Professional Learning in Current Research**

Initially it may appear as though there is a plethora of qualitative empirical research on teacher-driven professional learning in the context of literacy instruction to date. However, after searching exhaustively for the qualitative empirical literature published in the past decade concerning the ways in which K–12 literacy teachers engage in grassroots professional learning, I could identify only articles that did not claim this particular nomenclature to describe what was happening. Although the initial search yielded over 1,000 articles, it became evident that many of the empirical studies focused on professional learning mandated at the school, district, or state level. Even then, in a close reading of studies that claimed to report teacher-focused professional development for literacy instruction, I found that none focus on grassroots professional learning as I conceive of it. It is worth acknowledging that although action research is typically teacher driven (see Herr & Anderson, 2015), I was interested in examining studies that captured teachers’ everyday and organically homegrown professional learning. In light of this definition
of grassroots professional learning, it appears that little attention has been paid in recent years to understanding teacher learning in a grassroots sense.

As previously discussed, grassroots professional learning involves classroom teachers collectively identifying an area in need of improvement or deeper understanding in their literacy instruction and acting to address it with each other. However, in the empirical literature I reviewed, teachers’ professional learning needs in the context of literacy instruction were identified by others. For example, the professional learning was initiated by researchers themselves (Dunsmore, Ordoñez-Jasis, & Herrera, 2013; Hindin, Morocco, Mott, & Aguilar, 2007; Kervin, 2007; Wardrip, Gomez, & Gomez, 2015) or consultants (Schnellert, Butler, & Higginson, 2008). Similarly, in two studies, teachers volunteered to work with researchers on a researcher-generated literacy-related project (Parsons, Parsons, Morewood, & Ankrum, 2016; Wardrip et al., 2015). It is important to note that all of the professional learning included in this group of studies was grounded in the teachers’ everyday work in their classrooms (Baildon & Damico, 2007; Córdova & Matthiesen, 2010; Dunsmore et al., 2013; Hindin et al., 2007; Kervin, 2007; Parsons et al., 2016; Schnellert et al., 2008; Wardrip et al., 2015); nevertheless, the teachers themselves were not involved in identifying an area of need. Rather the focus of their learning was selected or predetermined by others. In a number of studies, teachers’ learning itself was managed by researchers and seemingly limited to the duration of the study (Carbone & Reynolds, 2013; Hindin et al., 2007; Kervin, 2007; Parsons et al., 2016; Schnellert et al., 2008; Wardrip et al., 2015). In summary, unlike in grassroots professional learning, teachers in the aforementioned studies were not involved in making decisions about designing, resourcing, or even the leading of their professional learning.
Another characteristic of grassroots professional learning as I see it is teachers’ highly contextualized collaboration with each other. Most of the studies in the review mentioned above focused on collaboration between teachers and researchers rather than on teachers collaborating with teachers (Baildon & Damico, 2007; Carbone & Reynolds, 2013; Córdova & Matthiesen, 2010; Parsons et al., 2016; Schnellert et al., 2008). For example, Córdova and Matthiesen (2010) reported on their participation in the Cultural Landscapes Collaboratory (a partnership with the National Writing Project), in which they worked collectively to bridge the gap between students’ literacies and the mandated curriculum. In contrast to the ideal of grassroots professional learning, this group of studies did not involve everyday literacy teachers pooling their expertise and knowledge with each other.

In this section, I have briefly discussed the empirical qualitative research from the past decade relating to teacher-centric professional learning for literacy instruction. Despite its teacher-centric claims, this body of work centered on professional learning in which the focus of that learning was decided by others and teacher collaboration was not meaningfully involved. In short, the aforementioned studies do not align with my conceptualization of grassroots professional learning. Therefore, it pays to ask: In what ways does a group of elementary teachers engage in grassroots professional learning with each other?

**Framing Theory**

In this study, I use social learning theory to inform and guide my research design, data collection, and subsequent analysis. This theory provides a useful framework in which to conduct a qualitative study of the ways in which a group of elementary literacy teachers engage in grassroots professional learning with each other. As explained earlier, I define grassroots learning to be professional learning generated purposefully by and through the authentic
everyday work of teachers. Key elements of grassroots professional learning include a bottom-up, collaborative, and highly contextualized approach. Although there are different theoretical frameworks that can be used to understand teachers’ grassroots professional learning (e.g., community of practice, professional learning communities), social learning theory is an arguably best fit for the study, because it focuses on teachers’ organic and fluid collective professional learning.

Central to this theory of learning is the idea that “our understanding of content is socially constructed through conversations about that content and through grounded interactions, especially with others around problems or actions” (Brown & Adler, 2008, p. 18). Grounded interactions refers to the practice of meaningfully participating in the social contexts and situations in which learning takes place. Thus, social learning theory draws heavily on Vygotskian principles (e.g., learning through collaboration with more experienced peers; Vygotsky, 1978) but pays close attention to how we come to understand things by means of input from and engagement in the social networks we participate in with similarly minded groups of others (cf. Brown, 2002; Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Thomas & Brown, 2011). Although members of this group of others may share interests, they vary in experience and skills. Unlike a constructivist view of learning, which posits that knowledge is constructed entirely from one’s own experiences, social learning theory suggests that knowledge is constructed and reconstructed collectively with others in social contexts. In this view, conversations and discussions with others afford activities to internalize new information, thus making it “actionable knowledge” (Brown, 2002, p. 60). In other words, the opportunity to collectively mess around with new information can support one’s use of that newly constructed knowledge.
Brown and Adler (2008) developed their particular take on social learning to account for how a diverse collective of minds can afford fresh insights into what is being learned. Social learning theory thus can usefully enable us to see how small, self-forming groups of literacy teachers might learn more collectively, through shared learning activities, than if working alone or in a context where an instructor or expert leader simply tells them what to do. This fluid group, or what Thomas & Brown (2011) refer to as a collective, is defined by active engagement in the learning process. In other words, people participate at various times for various purposes based on their interest, needs, and experiences. Thus, there is no centralized expertise. Since no one is assigned a traditional leadership role, learners can assume leadership roles at any point. Notably, in a collective, the collection of people generally share “values and beliefs about the world and their place in it” (Thomas & Brown, 2011, p. 56). Therefore, the group constructs and negotiates shared expertise, which helps to advance the development of the group. Thus, using social learning theory to examine grassroots professional learning is grounded in the ideas that teachers are engaging in this type of learning with others and are participating in authentic practices of literacy instruction.

Given the heavy focus on social interactions and learning activities in which and by which we construct understandings, an integral aspect of social learning is learning to be a member of a group or community (Brown & Adler, 2008, p. 19). This entails adopting the social norms and engaging in the authentic activities, or practices, that define or shape that particular community (Brown & Adler, 2008; Brown & Duguid, 2017; Brown et al., 1989; Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Thomas & Brown, 2011). Simply put, according to this theory, literacy teachers are served well when they have opportunities to converse about literacy with others and to subsequently tweak the cultural activities and practices of literacy
instruction as enacted in their own teaching contexts. For a group of literacy teachers, these activities might involve sharing ideas and insights, working collectively on projects, helping each other solve problems, developing new ways of thinking about something, and the like.

Proponents of social learning theory argue that the process of learning to be members of a community purposefully immerses learners in the ways of becoming practitioners and also affords hands-on practice (Brown et al., 1989; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Brown and Duguid (2017) suggest, “Practice, then, both shapes and supports learning” (“Learning in Practice,” para. 1). Thus, teachers construct literacy knowledge as they engage in learning to be members, or to participate in the practice of literacy instruction with others. Investigating the ways teachers engage in grassroots professional learning through a social learning lens can inform how school leaders and researchers harness teacher agency to better support teacher-directed, collective professional learning activities in schools that are driven by teacher learning needs.

Because, according to my hypothesis, literacy teachers who engage in grassroots professional learning take initiative to address problems of practice as they arise, they use what Brown and Adler (2008) refer to as a pull mode of learning. Brown and Duguid (2017) have also referred to this mode of learning as learning on demand (“Learning on Demand,” para. 1). A pull mode of learning supports the gathering of resources when a specific need arises. I argue that this mode of learning is at odds with a “demand-push approach” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, p. 226) to professional learning that many schools and districts adopt given the culture of teacher accountability measures. Rather than anticipating teachers’ learning needs in advance, providing or pushing resources to teachers, and dictating the subsequent actions they must take, a pull model of learning assumes that teachers will pursue their own professional learning when interested in learning something new or improving their practice. Although this
mode of learning may represent a more idealistic take on teachers’ professional learning, I argue that many teachers might engage in this pull approach to learning with their colleagues as they pursue learning needs and interests. That is, they may collectively seek out resources, such as mentor texts, when beginning a new literacy unit. Thus, literacy teachers might engage in grassroots professional learning with colleagues when problems of practice arise in their local contexts. This is useful for me as a researcher in the present study to keep in mind because it contradicts the idea that knowledge must be pushed to teachers and instead suggests that teachers might pursue their own learning when the need arises. This is an idea I plan to attend to in my proposed research.

As it relates to the conception of grassroots professional learning I am building in this proposal, another useful, and related, concept in social learning theory is the idea of just-in-time-and-just-in-place learning. This concept is based on the idea that individuals learn in response to need (Brown & Duguid, 2017). Just-in-time-and-just-in-place learning can be defined as the “process of seeking knowledge when it is needed to carry out a particular situated task” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, p. 220). In other words, learning responds to context (Thomas & Brown, 2011). Proponents of social learning theory argue that when learners do not need what is being taught, they tend to ignore it, reject it, or fail to digest it (Brown & Duguid, 2017). On the other hand, under just-in-time-and-just-in-place learning lies the assumption that when resources are accessible, individuals can learn effectively. I argue that this view of learning directly contrasts with the preplanned, traditional forms of professional learning (which may not address teachers’ needs at that specific time), but may support literacy teachers’ grassroots professional learning. The concept of just-in-time-and-just-in-place learning suggests the importance of affording learners space to pursue their own learning as needed, but not forcing or mandating
it. It also reminds researchers that learning is not a neat package that is carefully timetabled and with outcomes firmly in place. In this proposed study, I will examine how teachers might engage in just-and-time-and-just-in-place grassroots professional learning with each other.

Although social learning theory will serve as the lens through which I explore the ways in which a group of elementary literacy teachers engage in grassroots professional learning with others, I would like to make the case for including the concepts of distributed leadership and agency in my framing theory. Distributed leadership is a concept found across a range of social theories, including discourse theory (e.g., Gee, 2007a), participatory culture theory (e.g., Jenkins, 2014), new literacies studies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011) and game theory (Halverson, 2012), to name a few. The term *distributed leadership* in all these theories describes how leadership is a porous and malleable role in an activity or interest space. Different people may take on leading roles at different times, depending on the activities. Other participants may never lead. Brown and colleagues (e.g., Brown & Adler, 2008) do not explicitly include distributed leadership as a central concept in their conception of social learning, but given their emphasis on shared and socially constructed knowledge, bringing this concept to the social learning table makes good sense because it adds nuance to our understanding of the roles individuals assume when engaging in collective learning. Indeed, distributed leadership as a concept is gaining ground in school-based studies. These studies tend in the main to examine collaborative or shared attempts to change school-based instructional practices. This conception of distributed leadership emphasizes collective practices rather than individual ones (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004; Spillane & Healey, 2010; Spillane & Orlina, 2005). Researchers studying school contexts and distributed leadership also recognize that leadership practices do not only occur in formally designated times or routines, like grade-level meetings (Spillane & Orlina, 2005). Thus, the
addition of distributed leadership to my framing theory recognizes the fluid and informal leadership teachers might demonstrate while learning with each other. Regardless of the leadership role one assumes, teachers engaging in grassroots professional learning also demonstrate agency in their work with each other.

Although my proposed study does not explicitly focus on teacher agency, I argue that teachers taking control of their own learning is an essential aspect of grassroots professional learning. The concept of teacher agency is found throughout the literature on professional development, professional learning, and school change (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a; Gourd, 2015; Pyhälö et al., 2012). Although the scholarship on teacher agency offers different conceptualizations, for the purposes of my study I define teacher agency as the capacity to act intentionally to bring about change in a particular teaching context. This capacity to act might take the form of engaging in discourse, choosing not to do something, or pursuing new learning (Gourd, 2015; Pyhälö et al., 2012). These ideas are useful in that they illustrate that teacher agency is embedded in teachers’ everyday work and choices in their classrooms and schools. Although Brown and colleagues do not specifically mention agency in social learning theory, they do posit that individuals use a pull model of learning to mobilize resources when a need arises. I argue that the concept of agency fits well with a pull model of learning and should therefore be included in the theory that frames my proposed study.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand the ways in which a group of literacy teachers engaged in grassroots professional learning. Notably, the teacher-centric studies on professional learning for literacy instruction published in the past decade do not focus on my conception of grassroots professional learning. Therefore, this study used social learning theory along with distributed
leadership and teacher agency to understand how teachers engage in grassroots professional learning with each other. Conducting a study of teachers who engage in grassroots professional learning can provide insight into how school-based administrators and policy makers might rethink formal professional development approaches to teacher learning.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which a small collective, or group, of teachers engaged in what I call grassroots professional learning—that is, professional learning experiences generated purposely by and through the day-to-day work of teachers. I used a qualitative research design to examine the following research question: In what ways does a group of elementary school teachers engage in grassroots professional learning with each other? A qualitative design approach was best suited for this study given the highly contextualized nature of what I have defined as grassroots professional learning (see Chapter 2 for more on this). This approach also was best suited for my study because it allowed for participants to be co-researchers in terms of data collection, which, in turn, helped me to maximize data collection possibilities despite not having extended time to observe classroom practices or professional interactions in person. My aim for this study was to examine close-up what professional learning looks like on the ground across one academic semester and to perhaps use my findings to prompt policy makers and school administrators to reconsider how they can better support teacher learning.

In the section that follows, I describe the rationale for using a qualitative research design. Then, after discussing my positionality as a researcher, I describe the context of my study, including the methods used to recruit participants. In the third and fourth sections, respectively, I outline the data collection methods employed in this study as well as how I analyzed the data I collected. In the final sections of this chapter, I discuss possible ethical issues in this study, my trustworthiness in reporting my research, and the limitations of my study.
Methodological Approach: Qualitative Design

To understand the ways in which an already-in-place group of elementary classroom teachers engaged in grassroots professional learning with each other, I used a qualitative methodological approach because such an approach typically seeks to capture how individuals construct meaning from, or interpret, their lived experiences (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Given that the aim of this study was to better understand my participants’ collective professional learning experiences and practices as they were embedded in their everyday work and responsibilities as teachers, a qualitative approach was the best fit. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) refer to the kind of approach I designed here as basic qualitative research (p. 23), but I argue that basic as a descriptor undermines the worth of the methodological approach I used. Therefore, I refer to my approach straightforwardly as a qualitative research design. A qualitative design comprises an inductive process wherein data, constructed as such in part by the theoretical framing of a study and its research focus, including interviews, observations, and documents, are collected in order to identify patterns or themes that respond in some way to a guiding research question or problem (Flick, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). Data for this study included semistructured interviews, documents, audio recordings, and other publicly accessible documents. The use of multiple sources of data provided me with different vantage points that told usefully different accounts about these teachers’ work (cf. similar designs discussed in Maxwell, 2010). By collecting multiple types of data, I was able to capture key ways in which teachers are engaging in grassroots professional learning because I was able to triangulate the data I collected from participants. Certainly, a number of qualitative research designs can be used to study teachers’ learning. These include, for example, ethnography and case study. My
study did not employ an ethnographic approach, however, because I was not focusing on the culture of this particular group of teachers, and a case study approach was also not the best fit since my unit of analysis was not the group itself (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rather, I was focused on the professional learning that teachers engaged in with each other—that is, the processes and practices that participants reported as they pursued their grassroots professional learning. Therefore, it was important to choose a research design that could capture the complexity of what professional learning looked like on the ground and teachers’ sense-making and interpretations of those experiences. This design also needed to mesh logically with my own positionality in a way that enabled me to recognize my construction and analyses of the data as such.

**Positionality**

I formerly taught first grade at a public elementary school in a suburban, northern New Jersey district that employed a team of literacy consultants each year to occasionally facilitate professional development for all elementary school teachers. As discussed in Chapter 1, I was also a member of a literacy-based coaching co-op organized by said literacy consulting firm. For this study, I did not include teachers from my former district because I was interested in seeing what homegrown professional learning looked like in educational contexts outside my own experiences. However, having taught for over fifteen years in the public school system, I acknowledge that my own professional experiences shaped how I understand “good” teacher learning and professional development and how I viewed the data I collected and analyzed. In fact, I unquestionably consider myself to be an insider in terms of public school teaching in the context of the northern New Jersey suburbs (cf. insiders discussed in Herr & Anderson, 2015). As a researcher, I was challenged by this insiderliness, because it could have interfered
with my data collection and analysis by coloring my interpretation of what teachers reported in
the context of their professional learning and, no doubt, will have inescapably shaped the
meaning I made of participants’ professional learning. However, I believe that my
understanding of and experiences with the public school setting helped me gain participants’
trust, and they seemed to feel comfortable with my study throughout its run. To balance my
insider perspective as much as I could, I strove to select participants with whom I had no
personal relationships and who taught in a school that I had no involvement with, which, I argue,
helped me to “make the familiar strange” (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003, p. 17). In that
sense, I positioned myself as an outsider in terms of the study’s immediate context.

As a former classroom teacher who assumed leadership roles and facilitated professional
development in my district, I am passionate about how we can rethink professional learning so
that teachers can have the space to pursue their own learning with colleagues in a grassroots
manner. In fact, my grade-level colleague and I had been involved in similar work at our school,
and I was keenly aware of my grassroots orientation. Qualitative researchers recognize that
the researcher’s own voice and interests can often drown out those of their participants (Luttrell,
2010). As a researcher, I understood that it is impossible to be completely neutral, but I built
checks into my study to ensure that I was representing my participants and their work accurately.
To that end, I maintained a reflective journal in a Google Doc to interrogate and critically reflect
on my role as teacher researcher, my experiences with and beliefs about professional learning,
and the insights I gained throughout the research process. For example, I regularly wrote down
my questions or wonderings about the data I collected. These notes helped me to make my own
preferences and prejudices more overt to myself, because I referred to those notes as I began to
develop possible findings. I discuss the use of this journal in greater detail in a later section.
Since I strongly believe grassroots professional learning is both a useful concept and a useful practice for the field of teacher development, I also used my journal to explicitly document the choices I made when analyzing my data with the goal of ensuring that I remained fully aware of how I was making meaning or interpreting the patterns I was generating via my analysis and that I tried hard to minimize the influence of my own grassroots stance on my analysis (cf. similar moves advocated in Luttrell, 2010). For example, teachers in this study regularly spoke of their positive experiences with formal professional development opportunities—many of which they attended out of district. Had I chosen to ignore these accounts because they did not align with my own positive feelings about grassroots learning, I would have lost the opportunity to report on the messiness of teachers’ professional learning. Additionally, I was mindful of trying not to guide participants’ responses during interviews, but instead strove to be open to their responses as they made their own meaning of their experiences with grassroots professional learning. For example, during the semistructured interviews, teachers often talked about their collective work in ways that did not match my own conceptualization of grassroots professional learning. During these conversations, I did my best to invite teachers to explain their experiences in their own terms without imposing my ideas and beliefs on them. Thus, in our second interview, I invited Elise to clarify why the group often worked independently to create things rather than collaborating on them during lunchtime get-togethers (See Figure 3.1).
I used triangulation, member checks, and conversations with critical friends (which I describe in a later section) to ensure that my own subjectivity did not entirely cloud my vision or interpretations of teachers’ grassroots professional learning or that I was able to recognize my subjectivity’s role in the interpretations I arrived at while analyzing my data.
In sum, as a researcher, I was eager to learn with and from the participants in this study, to make a space for teachers’ voices throughout this study and my reporting of it, and to highlight the important work they are doing in their school without influencing what participants said during the interviews or unthinkingly skewing my own sense-making of what I was seeing in the data.

**Context**

I conducted this study in Brooks Elementary School in an upper-middle-class K–12 public school district in suburban, northern New Jersey. Brooks School serves approximately 400 students in grades 4 and 5. Four years ago, Brooks School was organized into the following departments: humanities (reading, writing, and social studies) and science/math. In short, teachers at the school taught one of those areas to two different sections of students across a day rather than being responsible for teaching all content areas to one class. In recent years, district professional development initiatives focused on supporting elementary teachers by implementing the workshop model for literacy instruction. Although literacy teaching was part of the context of this study, it was not a part of my analytic focus, which was on professional learning.

**Participants**

One group of four white elementary school literacy teachers who engaged in what I initially described as grassroots professional learning was the focus of this study. I deliberately chose to focus on literacy teachers because I am interested in literacy and because this choice helped me identify and bound a group of teachers for the purposes of this study. As described earlier, I had no relationships with the study participants or involvement in the school in which they taught. To begin, and using purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015), I requested that a colleague from the literacy coaching co-op I mentioned earlier, a professional
group in which I participated, identify one access teacher (someone who engaged in grassroots professional learning with others). The colleague did so, and this status was confirmed by the selected teacher herself. Using the conception of grassroots professional learning developed in my literature review, I needed this access teacher to meet the following criteria: (a) held a current position as a classroom teacher, (b) taught at least one component of literacy (i.e., writing, reading, word study), (c) informally planned and facilitated professional learning with her colleagues, and (d) had engaged in this type of work for approximately one school year and was continuing this literacy work during the upcoming school year. Importantly, the professional learning that the access teacher engaged in with others could not be mandated or required by the school or district’s administration. Since I used selection criteria that aligned with my definition of grassroots professional learning, I ensured that the access teacher fit the description I outlined above.

I also invited teachers who directly engaged in grassroots professional learning with the access teacher to participate in the study. Again, I did not have relationships or involvement with these teachers. Thus, I asked the access teacher to identify teachers who participated in this work with her (cf. Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015), and I approached each one via email. Although I refer to the teachers as a “group,” I used this term to mean “participants.” Since it was reasonable to expect teachers’ involvement in the group to be fluid over time, the term participant was more appropriate than member, which implies a more long-term, consistent involvement and strict boundaries with respect to who is in the group. I initially hypothesized that this group would include approximately five teachers based on recent research into knowledge broker teachers conducted by Jusinski (2018a), where her version of an access teacher worked with roughly five teachers in her respective brokering network.
As already mentioned, using the criteria I had generated for selecting participants, I identified one access teacher who was reportedly engaging in grassroots professional learning. In reporting on this study, I purposely chose not to reveal which participant was the access teacher because I did not want to inadvertently portray her as the leader of the group. Prior to the initial interview with the access teacher, I asked her, via email, to provide the names of any teachers she collaborated with to learn more about literacy instruction and practice. She provided the names and email addresses of three teachers, and I then invited them via email to take part in the study. All four participants were white females with at least six years of teaching experience.

I asked each participant to choose a pseudonym that I would use to protect her privacy. Table 3.1 provides a brief overview of each study participant.

Table 3.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Years in Current School</th>
<th>Years at Current Grade Level</th>
<th>Grade Level/Teaching Position</th>
<th>Degree(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elise</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Grade 5/Humanities</td>
<td>Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education and Biblical Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Grade 5/Humanities</td>
<td>Bachelor of Arts in English Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Grade 5/Humanities</td>
<td>Bachelor of Arts in English and Psychology; Master’s Degree in Public Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
<td>Years of Teaching Experience</td>
<td>Years in Current School</td>
<td>Years at Current Grade Level</td>
<td>Grade Level/Teaching Position</td>
<td>Degree(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Grade 4/ Humanities</td>
<td>Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Elementary Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Elise**

Elise is a fifth-grade humanities teacher and has been teaching for over 17 years. She has taught in her current district and school for five years. Elise holds an undergraduate degree in elementary education and biblical studies. Additionally, she worked as a preschool teacher for 10 years.

**Emma**

As a fifth-grade humanities teacher, Emma has been teaching six years. She has taught in her current district and grade level for four years. Emma is also one of two formally appointed technology teacher leaders in her school. She holds an undergraduate degree in English literature.

**Kristen**

Before becoming a teacher, Kristen worked in pharmaceuticals for 10 years. After deciding to change careers, she returned to school to earn her teaching certification and began working as a substitute teacher in her current district. Kristen has been teaching for over seven years and has taught at her current grade level for six years. She currently teaches fifth-grade humanities. Kristen holds an undergraduate degree in English and psychology and a master’s degree in public administration.
Mia

Before teaching fourth-grade humanities this year, Mia taught fifth-grade humanities in her current district. She has been teaching for approximately 12 years and has been in her current district for four years. Previously, she taught second grade in a different school district. Mia holds an undergraduate degree in psychology and elementary education.

Before beginning this study, I sought and obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), because my study consisted of work with human subjects. It behooves the researcher herself to ensure that she is acting appropriately and with real regard for duty of care. Therefore, I took the following measures to protect participants from risk, deception, and harm throughout my study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). Prior to our first conversation, I emailed to all participants an informed consent form that described the study and what their participation would entail. During our first conversation, which we set up via email, I explained the form in depth and invited participants to ask any questions about the form or the study. I explained that they could withdraw from the study at any point. I also explained the measures I would be taking to ensure that their identities remained anonymous, including the use of pseudonyms, storing data on a password-protected computer, and storing any cloud-based documents in a password-protected account. None of the four participants had any questions about the form or the process, and all the participants signed the consent form acknowledging that they were voluntary participants in the study at hand. Given that this study sought to describe rather than evaluate teachers’ engagement in grassroots professional learning, ethical concerns or issues did not arise during the study because my intention was only to better understand how this group engaged in collective learning.
Data Collection

In this study I sought to understand the ways in which teachers engaged in grassroots professional learning with each other over the course of one semester in a context of increasingly mandated professional development and teacher accountability for student learning outcomes. Therefore, I collected data across a four-month period from multiple sources including interviews, teacher-created documents, teacher-generated audio recordings of lunch get-togethers and in-district professional development sessions, and other publicly accessible online data as available. The methods I employed to collect data fit with my framing theory, which emphasized the organic, collective professional learning in which these teachers were engaging, and I drew on concepts from social learning theory, teacher agency, and distributed leadership in constructing my data collection tools and processes. Prior to the study I considered other possible forms of data, like posts to Twitter or other social media, but I did not collect them during the study because participants did not use them to engage with each other or document their collective professional learning for purposes of this study. Participants did mention using Twitter to obtain resources and stay in the know about literacy instruction. Each data collection tool or process used in this study is described below.

Semistructured Interviews

In this study, I conducted three 60-minute semistructured interviews with each participant periodically from late August to December 2018, as I will discuss in detail in this section. Semistructured interviews are best understood as less structured interviews that include open-ended questions that guide, but do not dictate, the direction of the conversation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although semistructured interviews include guiding questions and topics, they also offer flexibility in terms of responding to participants’ ideas in the moment (Flick, 2009;
Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, using open-ended questions helped me gather rich data about teachers’ grassroots professional learning (cf. similar claims in Maxwell, 2010). I developed interview questions and topics with my research question and framing theory in mind. I collected a total of 9 hours and 33 minutes of interview data during this study. Preliminary data analysis (e.g., pattern matching; Fetterman, 2010) informed the interview questions asked in subsequent interviews. I conducted all interviews face-to-face via Facetime or by phone, as requested by the participants. I audio-recorded the interviews using QuickTime and transcribed them. After checking the transcripts for accuracy, I reread them and jotted in my researcher notebook comments about patterns I was noticing in the teachers’ responses along with things I wanted to revisit or clarify with participants during subsequent interviews. While analyzing data, I scrutinized the interview transcripts to identify salient patterns that helped me to understand the ways in which teachers engaged in grassroots professional learning with each other, to identify patterns I needed to know more about, and so on.

**Initial round of semistructured interviews.** In this study, the initial round of audio-recorded semistructured interviews were designed to last 60 minutes and be conducted with each participant in late August. Two interviews were conducted via phone, and two via Facetime. Prior to each interview in this round, demographic information was collected by means of a Google form, which included asking for details about the respondent’s educational and work experiences as well as a description of her current teaching contexts (i.e., district, school, classroom, student body, etc.). The use of this Google form proved useful in that all participants provided detailed information in response to the following questions:
• Tell me about your educational background. What degrees and certifications do you have?
• How long have you been teaching? In this school? Grade level?
• Tell me about your school and classroom.

During this interview, I focused on questions about the ways in which each teacher learned about best or innovative practices in literacy, how they collaborated with colleagues, and their experiences with literacy-focused professional development, as shown in Table 3.2. I developed this table prior to conducting interviews, and it records the decision making that loosely guided the first round of semistructured interviews.
Table 3.2

**Sample Initial Interview Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Probes</th>
<th>Data I Hope It Generates</th>
<th>Relationship Between These Data and My Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question 1</strong>: In my work with other teachers, I’ve heard two broad positions on district- or school-mandated PD (professional development): One is that the PD supplied is poor quality or too top-down in nature so that it’s imposed on teachers and a one-size-fits-all kind of thing. The other is that teachers don’t know what to do, or can’t do something, because they haven’t had any PD on it. And yet I know a lot of teachers—like yourself—who assume responsibility for their own professional learning needs in response to a new curriculum directive or to understand something better. Tell me how you learn more about really good literacy teaching and learning.</td>
<td>In what ways do you involve other teachers in this?</td>
<td>The data collected by this question are about how the respondent takes responsibility for her own professional learning. Ideally, it will draw out data about what propels her to go reading up or looking for stuff about literacy; where she tends to go online or offline; who she tends to turn to for insights/help; etc.</td>
<td>These data address the “ways” part of my research question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Question</td>
<td>Probes</td>
<td>Data I Hope It Generates</td>
<td>Relationship Between These Data and My Research Question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 2: In my conversations with teachers, they often express interest in working with their grade-level or building-level colleagues to learn more about literacy. Tell me about some of the ways you collaborate with your colleagues to learn more about literacy instruction or practices.</td>
<td>How do you share insights/new learning? Resources?</td>
<td>This question will draw out information regarding collaboration. It focuses the respondent on talking about how she works with others to learn as much as she can about literacy instruction (in general or something specific).</td>
<td>This is the “with colleagues” part of my research question. It will also entail the “ways” of grassroots professional learning (GPL).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 3: Earlier we talked about the different ways you learn more about literacy instruction and practices. Describe one time that you and your colleagues worked together to learn more about literacy or pursue a specific goal related to literacy instruction.</td>
<td>How did you pool ideas?</td>
<td>This question focuses on a concrete example of how the “ways” of GPL and collaboration play out, so I can compare what the respondent actually did and what she says she does.</td>
<td>This question reflects the “with colleagues” part of my research question as well as the “ways” of GPL.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 4: New Jersey educators are required to create a PD plan with our supervisors outlining our professional goals and how we will work to achieve them. Often this process involves attending district-sponsored or out-of-district PD. Tell me about the literacy PD you have been required to attend over the years.</td>
<td>What did you get out of it?</td>
<td>This question will draw out information regarding the respondent’s local context/situation. It will also provide data regarding how GPL is situated in larger system and possibly contrast with the respondent’s GPL work.</td>
<td>This question will contrast with the GPL part of my research question.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another key purpose of this interview was to begin to develop trust with participants. The semistructured nature of the interviews gave me space to ask teachers to elaborate on or clarify their responses. For example, Elise spoke during our conversation of teachers rolling out curriculum, and I was able to ask her to provide more details about what happened during the roll-outs (see Figure 3.2).
El1.12  Elise  Okay so our district has been really good about giving us PD that’s applicable to new initiatives or new curriculum. For instance, Word Study. That has been really helpful to have somebody come in who really knows Word Study and to really give us some concrete examples and resources. So that’s been helpful. Something else that we’ve done and I would actually like to see more of is for during a PD day... because we write our own curriculum, I think it would be helpful if we were given a little bit more time for those of us who wrote the curriculum to then roll it out with everybody else who’s in our PLC...

El1.13  Heather  Hmm.

El1.14  Elise  …within our department. We’ve done that. It was super helpful. Everybody found it really beneficial. I’d like to see more of that because, when we’ve done that, it has been helpful.

El1.15  Heather  Can you tell me what that looks like in terms of the people who wrote the curriculum rolling it out to their, their, teammates?

Figure 3.2. Excerpt from first semistructured interview with Elise.

The first round of interviews provided useful details about how teachers experienced professional learning with their colleagues, in their school, and outside their district as well as how they collaborated with each other.

Second round of semistructured interviews (with an eliciting device). I aimed to conduct the second round of semistructured interviews with all study participants between mid-October and mid-December. I conducted two of the four interviews via Facetime during mid- to late October. However, due to extenuating circumstances, two of the participants were not available during the proposed time frame. Therefore, I conducted the second interviews with those two teachers via Facetime as soon as they were available: the end of November and mid-December,
respectively. In this hour-long, audio-recorded interview, I used an eliciting device to gather information about the nature of the group participants’ collaboration with each other (e.g., Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). Prior to scheduling this second round of interviews, I emailed participants and asked them to draw or create a representation of the group that showed how participants collaborated or networked with each other, and I asked that they share that representation with me via email or Google Drive. Open-ended questions for this round of interviews focused on gathering data about the dimensions of the group; their (inter)relationships; the ways in which they shared ideas, resources, and problems; and how they resolved tensions, conflicts, or disagreements. Again, all of this was in keeping with my research question and framing theory, which drew on concepts from social learning theory, distributed leadership, and teacher agency. Questions took the following forms:

- Tell me about your group. What started your involvement with it? What keeps you involved in it?
- How do you find time to participate in the group?
- If disagreements arise, how do you handle them?
- Tell me about the different ways that you share ideas and/or resources in the group.

These interview data and teacher-created representations were especially useful as I triangulated the audio recordings, representations, and documents that teachers shared with me throughout the study. For example, during the second interview, participants referenced the challenges of trying to arrange a time to get together informally. A month earlier, Kristen had emailed me more specific details regarding this particular challenge. Additionally, the representations created by teachers helped me gain insights regarding how teachers viewed their collaboration in the
context of the group. For instance, one of Emma’s three representations depicted the group’s lunchtime meetings (see Figure 3.3).

![PLC Meetings]

*Figure 3.3. Representation of group shared by Emma prior to second semistructured interview.*

As she walked me through her drawing, I was able to learn about the self-assigned roles that teachers assumed during those meetings as a way to maximize the limited time they had together during their lunch period. Ultimately, I found the data gathered from the second semistructured interviews to be quite useful in terms of how the participants collectively engaged in grassroots professional learning and began to provide me with a more nuanced understanding of how the group collaborated with each other.

**Third round of interviews (with an eliciting device).** This third round of semistructured interviews with all participants focused on the process of grassroots professional learning, again
with the use of an eliciting device (e.g., Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). The final round of interviews with each of the four participants was conducted via Facetime in December. As I mentioned, due to extenuating circumstances, I interviewed one participant twice during the month of December. Each participating teacher was invited, prior to the hour-long audio-recorded interview, to share a document or artifact that represented something she shared with the group or learned. Participants shared the following artifacts with me for the purposes of our final interview: a student self-assessment, notes taken during an out-of-district professional development, a photograph of student work, and screenshots of a tweet and a private message sent to a colleague via Twitter along with a link to an article. Interview questions focused on unpacking the how of grassroots professional learning and aimed to gather data about each teacher’s process of learning. These questions included, for example, the following:

- Tell me about this [artifact]. How did you locate/create it? What background or contextual information about this artifact would be useful for me to know?
- What made you choose to share it with the others? How did you share it (e.g., printed form, email attachment, text-messaged hyperlink)?
- How was it received by members of the group? How do you know?
- What can I learn about you as a learner/your process of learning from this artifact?

Using an eliciting device in the final round of semistructured interviews gave me a better understanding of each teacher’s process of learning in the group. During the interviews, teachers walked me through the process they engaged in to create and share their artifact with others. Even the information participants provided about the artifact itself yielded useful information about group dynamics and (inter)relationships. For instance, Kristen shared a photograph of poems that her students created during one of their units. During our interview, she explained
that this artifact captured the group’s focus on identifying and using resources that supported the integration of reading, writing, and social studies. She also spoke of the joy it brought her when her colleagues in the group used resources or ideas she shared with them. Kristen offered this thought: “So this year, actually, Emma sent me an email that she got from a parent who loved when the poem came home. So that was so nice that she did that, that she shared that with me” (Kristen, Interview 3, December 10, 2018). Again, this third round of semistructured interviews afforded me the opportunity to triangulate data, including the audio recordings and documents.

**Documents**

Given I was unable to conduct classroom observations due to my own professional commitments, documents were an important, and easily accessible, source of data in my study that contributed to my understanding of grassroots professional learning. Therefore, I enlisted my participants as co-researchers in a data collection sense. Specifically, teachers were invited to provide the following documents: digital texts (email correspondence with each other, Google Docs, digital resources, digital files, photographs of teachers working together, and presentations) and printed texts (handwritten notes, teacher narratives, plans, or hard copies of teacher-created resources). In qualitative research, documents are a source of data that include written, visual, and digital materials that are relevant to the participants and/or study (Flick, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). Over the course of the study, I emailed participants approximately once a month and encouraged them to share documents that helped showcase the grassroots professional learning in which they were engaging with others (see Figure 3.4).
For purposes of data collection, each participant was invited to upload documents in her own shared-with-me Google Drive folder. Upon receipt of each participant’s signed consent form, I created a shared folder to which only the participant and I had access. To further protect each participant’s identity, I named the folders GrassrootsPLL followed by a randomly generated number. Because documents were uploaded by participants to their respective shared folder in Google Drive, I was able to mainly use the Google Doc or Slides comment function to ask questions or request clarifications about the uploaded documents (see Figure 3.5).
Figure 3.5. Screenshot of a document shared by Emma and the asynchronous conversation that took place via the Google chat function.

Thus, the documents themselves served as a virtual space in which we dialogued about the products the participants created and/or shared with each other. In all, the participants and I used the Google Docs comment feature to “talk” asynchronously in the context of 23 of the teacher-shared documents.

As teachers began sharing documents with me and as we engaged in said asynchronous conversations about said documents via the Google Docs comment feature and email, I recognized the need to create a customized system for naming documents that allowed me to make connections across documents. For instance, many documents shared by the study participants also included online links to articles, websites showcasing resources or suggestions for instructional practices, links to other Google Docs or Slides, Google Doc invitations to others in the group to edit docs, and/or emails to teachers in the group, teachers at the grade level, or me. To documents shared with me I assigned a document name consisting of a customized and sequential numbered-and-letter combination. For example, the document name ED.03ab
includes $E$ for participant’s first initial, $D$ for document, $03$ for the third document shared by participant, and $ab$ to signify that this document was composed of two distinct pieces. In my data catalog, I provided not only the document name but also the type of data collected, the merged PDF name (if the document contained multiple pieces), and any other important notes about the document itself (see Figure 3.6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Data Collected</th>
<th>Document Name</th>
<th>Merged PDF Name</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audio</td>
<td>EIA01</td>
<td>EID01</td>
<td>9-21-18 Google PD, see EID03 for email explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio</td>
<td>EIA02</td>
<td>EID01</td>
<td>Audio from district PD day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio</td>
<td>EIA03</td>
<td>EID01</td>
<td>Audio from lunch meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher notes</td>
<td>EID01</td>
<td>EID01abc</td>
<td>about world religions, World Religions PPT (EID01a) and unit plan (EID01b) linked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher and student resource</td>
<td>EID01a</td>
<td>EID01abc</td>
<td>PPT linked in EID01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher resource</td>
<td>EID01b</td>
<td>EID01abc</td>
<td>unit plan linked in EID01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google docs comment thread</td>
<td>EID01c</td>
<td>EID01abc</td>
<td>comment thread about EID1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student resource</td>
<td>EID02</td>
<td></td>
<td>historical fiction planning, see EID03 for email explanation, created during Google PD (EIA1) by Emma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email (to researcher)</td>
<td>EID03</td>
<td></td>
<td>explanation of Google PD (audio EIA01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student resource</td>
<td>EID04</td>
<td>EID04a</td>
<td>research form, see EID03 for email explanation, created during Google PD (EIA01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google docs comment thread</td>
<td>EID04a</td>
<td>EID04a</td>
<td>comment thread about EID02 and EID04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email (to researcher)</td>
<td>EID05</td>
<td></td>
<td>email explanation of Word Study Routines (EID06) and Word Study Cycle (EID06b) docs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher and student resource</td>
<td>EID06</td>
<td></td>
<td>word study routines adapted from Mia’s work last year; shared with grade 4-5 teachers along with cycle created by another teacher (EID06b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher resource</td>
<td>EID06b</td>
<td></td>
<td>word study cycle created by another teacher last year and shared with grades 4-5 teachers along with word study routines (EID06)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.6. Screenshot of an excerpt from my data catalog.

By using this classification system, I was able to develop a richer understanding of the documents and the context in which they were being created for or shared with others.

Although all four participants shared more than 40 documents with me throughout the study, the types of documents and quantities of each varied, as outlined in Table 3.3.
Most of the documents consisted of Google Docs created for other teachers (within the group and/or grade level) or students. However, the four participants also shared photographs of an artifact, email correspondences with each other, and teacher narratives about professional or instructional challenges. Over the course of the study, participants typically uploaded a document to their Google Drive folder after they had shared it with colleagues. Quite unexpectedly, one participant began to share documents with me in real time at some point in the study. That is, she included me directly on emails to colleagues when she shared a document with them. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the documents alone were not as useful as I thought they might be. For example, the documents themselves did not include background information or details about the particular context in which the teachers created or shared
the documents with the group. Instead, the conversations we had in and about the documents using the Google Doc comment function (and occasionally email) contributed richer information about the document itself, the (inter)relationships with the groups, and each participant’s learning process in the group and proved to be invaluable data sources (see Figure 3.7).
Figure 3.7. Screenshot of a Google conversation thread between Elise and me.
Audio Recordings

Since my own professional responsibilities precluded me from observing participants as they engaged in grassroots professional learning, I invited the group to record get-togethers using QuickTime and upload the audio files to their shared folder in Google Drive. By doing this, the four teachers provided data that captured their process of learning and collaborating with other teachers in the group (and sometimes at the grade level) rather than simply reporting on that process. In this way, the audio recordings helped to add a rich “being there” dimension to my study. After teachers uploaded audio files to Google Drive, the audio was transcribed by a transcription service. Two of the four participants shared a total of four audio recordings with me totaling 3 hours and 13 minutes. Two of the audio recordings were captured during lunch get-togethers at the participants’ school, and the other two were recorded during in-district professional development days. Although the audio recordings provided some fruitful information about how teachers engaged in professional learning with each other and about the relational aspect of teachers’ collective learning, the recordings were not as accessible as I had expected. For instance, multiple conversations often were going on at one time, which were challenging to keep track of across the recordings. Despite these challenges, I would not change anything about this aspect of my research design, because I was able to better understand dimensions of teachers’ professional learning that I would not have been privy to without the teacher-generated audio recordings. Similarly, checking the transcriptions for accuracy was incredibly time-consuming given the variability in audio quality, the number of speakers in the room, and the distance between the individuals and the recording device. Despite these challenges, the audio recordings enabled me to “attend” four sessions with teachers and obtain a sense of participants’ in-process collaborating and learning.
Transcriptions

All audio recordings from the three rounds of semistructured interviews and the audio recordings provided by participants were transcribed. On receiving each transcription, I listed applicable identifying information (e.g., with whom the interview was conducted, how and when it was conducted, the context of participant-provided audio) on the first page of the transcription and used single spacing for each utterance and double spacing between speakers, as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). I created and employed a customized and sequential numbered list formatting down the left-hand side of the page for each speaker. I checked the accuracy of the transcripts against the original interviews and group-provided audio recordings and made corrections immediately when I encountered errors. The process of listening to the recordings and reading the transcriptions was useful in familiarizing myself with the data, gathering notable information, noting patterns across the data. When I noticed something interesting in the transcripts, I added my noticings to my reflective journal, which I discuss in the next section.

Reflective Journal

Throughout my proposed study, I maintained a reflective journal (cf. Flick, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Maxwell, 2010; Ortlipp, 2008). As signaled earlier, this digital journal in Google Docs served different purposes in the context of my study. One of the many purposes of the journal was to be a space in which I regularly recorded any questions, concerns, or thoughts I had regarding the research process and the research itself. For instance, after conducting interviews with participants, I often listed follow-up questions or thoughts I wanted to clarify during subsequent interviews with participants. For example, in a journal entry after my first interview with Elise, I noted my curiosities regarding her use of the term PLC
(professional learning community) to refer to the group. In this entry, I also listed some questions I had regarding Elise’s use of the term, including why she chose this term to describe the group, and how the use of this term related (or did not relate) to administrative directives or district initiatives. Prior to the second and third round of interviews, I referred to my notes and created a running list of follow-up questions or ideas I wanted to revisit with the participants.

Additionally, I used this journal to examine, interrogate, and critically reflect on my role as a researcher and my own beliefs and assumptions about grassroots professional learning. This process was particularly useful when a participant shared a document or spoke about an experience that did not necessarily match my conceptualization of grassroots professional learning. For example, when teachers spoke of their lunchtime get-togethers serving as a functional check-in of sorts, I jotted about how my thinking around grassroots professional learning was shifting as a result of the empirical data I collected. I also used the journal to write about patterns I was starting to notice across the data, including the affective dimension of this group of teachers’ professional learning and the ways they leveraged in-district professional development opportunities. In essence, I used this space to begin to play around with and tweak the language I might adopt for codes and categories. This journal also served as a space to document the choices I made as a researcher in terms of data analysis (e.g., Luttrell, 2010). For example, I documented my thought process as I wrestled with whether or not to code the documents the teachers shared with me. Finally, I used my journal to record ideas and suggestions from conversations with my advisor and critical friends from the doctoral program.

In sum, this researcher journal helped me document the way my thinking changed over the course of the study and informed how I wrote up my research report.
Conclusion of This Section Describing My Data Collection Methods

In summary, by using a robust qualitative study design framed by social learning theory, I aimed at generating a rich understanding of how teachers engaged in grassroots professional learning with others. Collecting and analyzing a range of data types enabled me to address my research question: In what ways does a group of elementary school teachers engage in grassroots professional learning with each other? In doing so, I hoped to add deeper understanding of teachers’ on-the-ground professional learning in a context of teacher accountability and educational reforms.

Data Analysis

In this study, I used iterative coding methods (Saldaña, 2016) to analyze all data collected through interviews, documents, and audio recordings. The term iterative coding describes a cyclical and flexible process whereby codes are developed, refined, and shaped by the data (Saldaña, 2016) and the researcher’s purpose. As described earlier, before I began the analysis process, all interviews and audio files were transcribed using a transcription service. Although I initially considered coding the data by hand, the sheer number of data I collected made the analysis process seem daunting and cumbersome. I expressed my frustrations to my advisor and a number of critical friends in my doctoral program and ultimately decided to use Dedoose, a cloud-based, password-protected data analysis application, to facilitate the analytic process.

During the first cycle of analysis, I developed initial codes (words and phrases) soon after collecting the data (cf. advice on doing so in Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Flick, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Saldaña, 2016; Rapley, 2016). Specifically, I reviewed interview and audio transcripts carefully multiple times as I looked for repetitions or anything that struck me as interesting in the context of my research question. I also reviewed the documents teachers had
shared with me up to that point and carefully read the Google Docs comment threads and other documents associated with the shared document. In Dedoose, I highlighted the phrase, sentence, or paragraph that stood out to me and assigned a code and a corresponding definition to it (see Figure 3.8).

Figure 3.8. Sample of a highlighted text and related codes in Dedoose.

My reflective journal helped me to keep track of emerging patterns I saw in the data. During the first cycle of analysis, I generated codes using In Vivo and process coding to capture the actual language participants used during the interviews or in the audio provided and to capture the actions in which they engaged (Saldaña, 2016). Examples include *I’m not the only person* and *self-selecting*. At this time, I also began to export my data to a coding register in Google Docs. I listed initial codes in a register along with their definitions and examples from the data (Flick, 2009; Rapley, 2016). The top 10 initial codes that I developed after the first
round of semistructured interviews with the participants—and using just these data—are listed in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Uses in first interview transcripts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Struggling to find time to meet/talk with colleagues</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending external PD</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bringing “own specialties to the table”/“suitcases”</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending external PD together</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-selecting</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting at lunch</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rolling out something new</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing through technology</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking and thinking about what they will be doing</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working on curriculum/Knowing curriculum well</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As I collected and reviewed additional data, I created new codes if the data did not fit into existing codes. I also adjusted the definitions of the codes to clarify their meanings as I gathered more data. For instance, I ultimately decided that the term *share* would only be used in a code when referring to participants using the share function in Google Drive. As I coded my data, I tried very hard to not let my own positionality drive my codes. Given the cyclical nature of data analysis, these initial codes informed subsequent data collection, such as the development of interview questions (Rapley, 2016). In total, I developed 290 codes throughout the initial cycle of data analysis. I continued to collect and analyze data until I found that my codes were
repetitive and that I was gathering no new information by continuing to analyze data (cf. Rapley, 2016).

During the subsequent data-coding cycles, I further refined the initial codes, and ultimately I developed conceptual categories by grouping together like codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Rapley, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). In creating these categories, I aimed to capture the characteristics or properties of sets of codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I continued to look for repetitions and exceptions and modified these categories as I gathered more data. At times, I developed categories from codes and realized I could also generate subcategories. For instance, leveraging in-district opportunities and leveraging out-of-district opportunities were two subcategories that emerged under the category leveraging opportunities. While developing categories, I began to focus on the most salient categories and started to look for patterns among them and relationships between them (see Figure 3.9).
Ultimately, 19 categories emerged from my data (see Table 3.5). These categories were informed by my research question and framing theory and were subsequently used to generate themes from the collected data.

Table 3.5

Categories Generated Through Data Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accessing a network of resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-selecting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checking the boxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering what's useful to others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As I moved from generating categories to identifying themes, I realized that I needed a hands-on way to do so. Following the suggestion of a critical friend, I cut up pieces of paper from a Google Doc that I had used to organize the categories, subcategories, and codes (see Figure 3.10). I then physically began moving said pieces of paper around and tried out different ways the categories might go together to create themes.
As defined by Saldaña (2016), a theme is “an extended phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what it means” (p. 199). As I embarked on arranging and rearranging the categories, I frequently asked myself, “What is the common thread among this group of categories?” Although I ultimately settled on four themes that addressed my research question and contributed to the field (see Figure 3.11), naming the themes became a recursive process in which I tweaked the theme names and corresponding statements as I wrote up my report. I ultimately chose the following four themes: putting down our roots, coming (and staying)
together, getting messy with our learning, and being savvy about institutional structures and processes (see Figure 3.12).

Figure 3.11. Arrangement of four themes along with corresponding categories, subcategories, and codes.
Figure 3.12. Screenshot of themes and corresponding categories in Dedoose.
Within Dedoose, it was a straightforward and flexible process to assign and reassign codes to categories, which greatly facilitated exploring and tinkering with different ways the codes might go together in order to ultimately develop and refine my themes. Having all my data housed in one place and readily accessible, when coupled with an easy-to-navigate interface, made Dedoose a useful app to facilitate data analysis in this study.

**Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Trustworthiness and credibility are necessary to ensure that a study has been conducted rigorously (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Maxwell, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Trustworthiness requires that the researcher has collected sufficient data for the purpose of the study and demonstrates this sufficiency in writing up the study (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Maxwell, 2010). To ensure sufficiency, I continued to collect data until the information I gathered from the participants became redundant. That is, I was no longer identifying new patterns or trends in the data. This check also ensured I had collected enough data to generate robust patterns on which to base the claims I ultimately made in my written report.

To help build trustworthiness and credibility, I also used triangulation to confirm my findings across multiple data sources (cf. advice in Maxwell, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Triangulation is a method of ensuring credibility by using multiple data sources—for example, to cross-check data and confirm findings. In this study, I was able to compare what teachers reported during the three semistructured interviews to the documents they shared and the audio recordings of the group they provided over the course of the study. As I discussed earlier, since I was not able to physically be with the teachers while they engaged in their collective professional learning, I needed to triangulate the data in order to construct a rich understanding of what their learning looked like.
Throughout my study, I also engaged in regular conversations with my critical friends, who were colleagues in my doctoral program, and with my dissertation committee chair. Through our many conversations over the course of the study, they pointed out ideas that I might have overlooked, and they offered thoughtful feedback about my framing theory, data analysis, and findings. As I discussed earlier, a critical friend suggested I use Dedoose to house and analyze my data. Additionally, my critical friends provided practical suggestions throughout the analysis and writing processes. For instance, one of these friends suggested reordering my themes so that I moved from discussing the individual, group dynamics, interplay between the individual and the group, and the institutions. This larger pattern was not something I had even noticed, and it ultimately shaped how I wrote about, presented, and discussed my findings.

Additionally, my interpretations of the data I analyzed were subject to member checks (Maxwell, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In short, I returned my meaning making to the participants and asked for feedback in terms of my interpretations of the data. After drafting my findings chapter, I emailed participants a copy of that chapter as well as an outline of my findings. I invited each of them to provide feedback on my interpretations and clarify anything that they felt did not accurately capture their collective professional learning experiences. Two of the four participants responded to my invitation and expressed via email that my findings accurately captured the ways in which the group learned together and the processes they used to do so. Additionally, one of the participants asked for an explanation of social learning theory in light of my third finding about the messiness of teachers’ learning. In making a space for participants to offer their feedback on my findings, I was able to ensure that my own interpretations of the data were consistent with the participants’ interpretations of their experiences with grassroots professional learning.
Finally, as discussed earlier, I maintained a research journal to facilitate critical self-reflection on my positionality and subjectivity. For example, at times I found myself questioning whether what the teachers described in our interviews really matched my own conceptualization of grassroots professional learning. At these times, I would reach out to my critical friends, describe the related data, and discuss with them my interpretation (or misinterpretation) of the data. While writing my research report, I regularly revisited my journal entries to help me develop a deep and rich understanding of the data.

Limitations

The findings from this qualitative research study relate to the participating group of four teachers from one elementary school in New Jersey. My study therefore only offers a glimpse into what grassroots professional learning looks like in this specific context—a context that may be conducive to this kind of collective learning. Nonetheless, detailed accounts of small groups of people have been shown time and again to cast useful light on a range of processes and concepts we use to explain teacher learning and development—for example, teachers co-designing professional learning experiences in a school (Rodman, 2018), exploring what the development of grit looks like in third-grade math (Dodman, Zuidema, & Kleiman, 2018), studying technology integration in the context of English and social studies classes (Bohny, 2018), and studying the development of critical literacy in a second-grade classroom (Labadie, Wetzel, & Rogers, 2012). Thus, despite the aforementioned limitations, the findings from this study have the potential to contribute to our understanding of what professional learning looks like in daily practice and to help us reconsider how we can better support teacher learning in a context of teacher accountability and related reforms.
Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the methodological approach that this qualitative study employed to explore how a group of elementary school teachers engaged in grassroots professional learning with their colleagues. By providing a detailed overview of my data collection methods and process of data analysis, I aimed to show that my research methods were aligned with the purpose of this study. In the next chapter, I present and discuss my findings in detail before concluding this research report with a discussion of this study’s contributions to the field and implications for research and practice.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents and discusses four themes that grew out of a systematic analysis of the data collected during this study. Before elaborating on these, it pays to recap the question that guided this qualitative research study: In what ways does a group of elementary school teachers engage in grassroots professional learning with each other? The context for my study is grounded in an awareness that groups of teachers do actively identify their own learning needs and engage in collective professional learning with each other in ways that benefit their students and schools; teachers do not solely rely on professional development events provided by school and district administrators. As discussed in Chapter 2, I use the term *grassroots professional learning* to refer to professional learning experiences generated purposely by and through the day-to-day work of teachers. In conducting this in-depth study I intended to challenge top-down, one-size-fits-all approaches to professional development and to help to dispel a widespread assumption that such models of learning are the best way to introduce programs or other changes in a school; I also wanted to honor the behind-the-scenes hard work of teachers committed to learning new content, instructional practices, and approaches. My focus on a group of literacy teachers stems from my own professional experiences with teachers who worked collectively to learn more about literacy instruction and practices. A focus on literacy also helped me identify the group I studied. My study’s findings were informed by my framing theory (as discussed in Chapter 3), which drew on concepts from social learning theory, distributed leadership, and teacher agency. In this chapter, I present four themes that emerged from the multiple rounds of coding and category development undertaken while I analyzed the data: putting down our roots, coming (and staying) together, getting messy with our learning, and being savvy about institutional structures and processes. I ultimately found that the grassroots nature of these
teachers’ learning together was messy, nuanced, and grounded in their day-to-day responsibilities, practices, and personal relationships. In this chapter, by presenting four themes, I provide a snapshot of what homegrown professional learning looked like in the context of this study. In discussing these themes and findings, I draw on literature from social learning theory, distributed leadership, and teacher agency in order to foreground and discuss a number of important outcomes concerning each of these themes. In what follows, I present and discuss each finding in four separate sections.

**Putting Down Our Roots**

A key theme found in my data concerned *putting down our roots*, or the ways this group of teachers developed, navigated, and nurtured their relationships with each other. Whereas the extant academic literature tends to focus on the content of teachers’ learning (Baker-Doyle, 2017; Kyndt et al., 2016; Lohman, 2000; Schugurensky, 2000), my data strongly suggested that, in the context of this study, professional learning involved more than teachers’ collective learning activities surrounding/to do with literacy and literacy instruction. Throughout my interviews with the four teachers participating in this study and throughout my review of the data that these teachers collected and shared with me, it was clear that the relationships teachers had grown with each other in the group were an essential aspect of their professional learning. That is, this group of teachers’ professional learning also involved caring for each other in ways, I would argue, that helped them sustain their learning over time. Although the dimensions of these connections (e.g., relational, social, professional) were overlapping and interconnected, they are separated in this section for purposes of analysis and discussion. In the section that follows, I discuss the relational aspects of this group of teachers’ professional learning, including
how the group developed and sustained relationships, navigated the tricky parts of their collective professional learning, self-selected, and nudged others along.

**Developing and Sustaining Relationships**

Throughout my study, my conversations with the four participating teachers and my systematic analysis of the documents they collected and shared with me revealed that professional learning, in this context, significantly involved ways of developing and sustaining relationships with individuals in the group. In fact—and unsurprisingly, given the extant academic literature on group cohesiveness (Gee, 2007b; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Nolan & Molla, 2018; Owen, 2016)—the personal relationships among teachers in the group seemed to be integral to the professional learning in which these teachers were engaged with each other. Therefore, the key dimensions of the relational aspect of teachers’ professional learning that emerged through my analysis are worth attending to, including this group of teachers’ ways of developing friendships, connecting in different ways, and seeing and supporting others.

In our interviews, the teachers talked about the friendships they had developed with each other when they began working together and how those bonds strengthened over time. Mia discussed the importance of those relationships in the context of her professional learning:

I think there’s something to be said about relationships and rapport that people have [in our group]. Even we talk about the rapport between teacher and student. Well I think it’s also important, the rapport among colleagues as well, to know that we are learners. And we’re going to goof, and we’re going to make mistakes. That’s part of how we have to become better. (Mia, Interview 1, August 23, 2018)
Clearly, Mia recognized that the rapport and the relationships these teachers developed and sustained in the group were integral to their professional learning. For Mia, those relationships involved seeing each other as learners and paying attention to each other’s learning. Notably, all participating teachers described the beginnings and the longevity of these relationships when they expressed that they “definitely clicked from the beginning” (Kristen, Interview 2, October 17, 2018), that they had “gotten along well for a long time” (Elise, Interview 2, October 28, 2018), that the connections in the group were “always very encouraging and supportive since day one” (Emma, Interview 2, November 26, 2018), and that “those relationships certainly grew exponentially as time has gone on” (Mia, Interview 2, December 14, 2018). Though often overlooked in the literature on professional learning, and in traditional professional development itself, the relational aspect of collective professional learning was definitely something the group of teachers participating in this study were deeply cognizant of, and they valued the personal connections they had with each other.

Interestingly, all four participating teachers talked about the origins of their friendships with each other and how feelings of newness (about the district, curriculum, instructional practices, etc.) brought them together. The teachers’ having started teaching at Brooks School around the same time, and when new school initiatives were being launched (e.g., workshop model for reading and writing instruction, departmentalization soon thereafter), turned out to be significant to their relationship development. Because of this newness, teachers described being “in the same boat” as their colleagues (Elise, Interview 2, October 28, 2018; Kristen, Interview 2, October 17, 2018). Those new professional experiences, as described by Elise, “probably made us all [in the group] need each other a little more” (Elise, Interview 2, October 28, 2018). These instances pointed to the different ways that relationships began to form in times of professional
change at Brooks School. In other words, the relationships teachers in this group developed seemed to be context dependent; teachers began to develop relationships as they navigated new professional challenges. Throughout the data, it was evident that feelings of newness, often experienced differently by the teachers in the group, brought this group of teachers together as they began to engage in professional learning together.

Not only did the group overtly recognize the relationships they developed with each other, but they also provided important insights into the nuances of said relationships. Although I refer to the participants in this study as a group, it became clear through a close analysis of the data that those relationships differed among the teachers in the group. Throughout their interviews, the participating teachers spoke, in distinct ways, about why they got along with others in this group. When asked about the existence of different relationships in the group, these teachers spoke of similarities in work habits or what was going on in their personal lives at a particular time. Mia described how her own children connected her with this group of teachers: “They were so intrigued by my kids . . . they had kind of, in a lot of ways, motherly advice for me” (Mia, Interview 2, December 14, 2018). In analyzing the interviews with participating teachers, I came to understand that the connections forged in the group were a nuanced and essential aspect of professional learning in this context. Within the group, teachers initially were drawn to individuals in the group and ultimately formed relationships with each other for different reasons. Rather than having the relationships imposed upon them by administrators or the school system, teachers connected with each other from the beginning and developed their relationships with each other in more organic ways. This finding underscored the importance of not forcing relationships in the context of professional learning.
Given the way that the teachers in this study talked about the different relationships they developed with their colleagues in their group, it was no surprise that they reported connecting with each other in different ways as they engaged in professional learning. These ways of connecting built and sustained rapport and joy in the group as they engaged in their collective learning. In fact, I would argue that the connections among the teachers in their group were integral to the professional learning they pursued together. When asked about why she continued to be involved with the group after being assigned to teach another grade level, Mia responded, “Truthfully, I think the personal relationships have certainly been at the top of the list in terms of why I stayed in communication and collaboration with them” (Mia, Interview 2, December 14, 2018). Such comments made by the teachers participating in this study pointed to the value they ascribed to the connections they developed with others and suggested that these relationships were as important to them as learning about literacy practices and instruction.

Although this group of teachers was incredibly dedicated to their collective learning and the students’ learning, they managed to balance their professional learning and personal relationships through storytelling and humor. By closely analyzing the audio recordings of the group’s informal get-togethers and in-district professional development days, I saw clearly that this group’s professional learning involved relaying stories or telling jokes related to their professional or personal lives as a way of remaining connected to each other as they worked together. Additionally, this group of teachers was so dedicated to their work that the data suggested that telling stories and jokes was important as a way to take a quick break from the strenuous mental exertion involved in professional learning. Often the stories teachers told during their time together were deeply personal accounts that suggested that the group had established trust with each other, too. The following exchange between Elise and Kristen during
a district professional development day exemplified the use of a personal story to sustain relationships in the group:

Kristen: I feel like your ring is like a [Princess] Diana ring.

Elise: Do you know, Scott gave this to me on our 13th anniversary, which was right after 9/11? Everybody here knows somebody who knows somebody. One of the teachers in my preschool lost her husband. . . . I wish I could say that I handled that whole thing so much better, but it really impacted me emotionally. So, when George Bush came out and said, “Go out. Spend money. Keep the economy going. Don’t let yourselves be scared into a . . .” and he got me this ring.

Kristen: How nice. (Elise, teacher-generated audio recording, October 29, 2018)

By sharing this personal anecdote with Kristen (and the other teachers who were present), Elise arguably showed vulnerability (i.e., “it really impacted me emotionally”) and also offered information about herself that others might not otherwise know (i.e., the story behind—and ongoing personal significance of—her ring). It was evident from this exchange that Elise felt trusting enough with the group to talk about something that was very emotional and meaningful for her. Throughout the audio recordings teachers shared with me, there were examples of teachers telling jokes amidst their collective engagement in professional learning. In one recording from a district professional development day, the group talked about changes that the New Jersey Department of Education might make to the state’s standardized test. After Kristen shared her thoughts that the new governor would issue contracts “to all the people who they owe favors,” Elise remarked, “Oh, you’re just a conspiracy theorist” (Elise, teacher-generated audio recording, October 29, 2018). The group erupted in laughter as they continued working on the task at hand. At first glance, it would seem as though this group of teachers were not focused on
learning as they told stories and jokes. However, the ease with which the group used storytelling and humor while they engaged in their collective professional learning pointed to a sense of camaraderie these teachers developed in the group. Therefore, I argue that this togetherness helped the group to sustain their professional learning over time.

In addition to having different ways of connecting with each other, these teachers demonstrated different ways of seeing and supporting their colleagues in the context of their professional learning. For purposes of this report, *seeing and supporting others* refers to how teachers in this group recognized each other’s vulnerabilities and concerns and developed ways to help each other. A major pattern across the conversations I had with participating teachers was the way they kept their classroom doors open for their colleagues and the way their colleagues reciprocated. In this context, teachers’ classrooms became a judgment-free space that their colleagues could pop in and out of for different reasons at any time, including asking for help and seeing what’s going on, which will be discussed later in this chapter. As Mia described, this open-door policy created a space wherein she felt comfortable asking for support from her colleagues when needed, particularly in the early years of her teaching career at Brooks School: “Right off the get-go, the group of colleagues that I . . . Elise was on one side of me, and it was constantly like, ‘Okay, shoot out the door. Leave the door open. I need to ask you a question, can you come to the hallway?’” (Mia, Interview 2, December 14, 2018). The physical act of keeping their classroom doors open represented, for the teachers in this group, an open invitation to ask questions, share concerns, or seek information. This simple, yet profoundly symbolic, gesture of leaving one’s door open also seemed to suggest that teachers had each other’s backs, or were willing at any moment to offer help to their colleagues in the group. Unlike the context of the group’s get-togethers, this open-door policy contributed to a low-risk space wherein a
teacher could seek out someone in particular, ask for help on the spot, and receive that help at the
very moment she needed it.

Another pattern that emerged during the study was the way in which these teachers
valued the validation they felt when they encountered others in the group who had experienced
similar self-doubts or challenges. Part of what seemed to bond this group of teachers together
was the recognition that they were not alone and that everyone was at a different point in her
learning about something literacy related. These teachers spoke of feeling a general pressure to
“be in the know all the time” (Mia, Interview 3, December 22, 2018) and “be on point all the
time” (Mia, Interview 3, December 22, 2018) or of feeling insecure when they found themselves
thinking, “I can’t figure this out” (Kristen, Interview 2, October 17, 2018), “I’m struggling with
this” (Kristen, Interview 2, October 17, 2018), or “Would it be okay if I did that?” (Elise,
Interview 2, October 28, 2018). This group of teachers valued knowing that others experienced
similar pressures and self-doubts. In one instance, Mia indicated that she felt validated when she
realized that her colleagues in the group were “questioning things or confused by things, [were]
looking for more answers.” She continued, “That’s been a confidence booster. . . . It’s okay that I
don’t know this. . . . These other people [in the group] have those challenges as well, and so
that’s okay” (Mia, Interview 3, December 22, 2018). In this context, the vulnerability was
related to emotional trust and was key to overcoming the isolation that most teachers experience
in what Lortie (1975) described as “egg crate” models of teaching, which emphasize teacher
individualism over interdependence (p. 14). The teachers in this group may not have purposely
sought out this validation from their colleagues, but when they encountered it, it confirmed that
they were not alone in having questions, doubts, or concerns about their literacy instruction.
Navigating the Tricky Parts

Not surprisingly, the group encountered challenges or disagreements as they engaged in professional learning and found ways to navigate the tricky parts of their work together. In the context of this study, I use the term *tricky parts* to refer to personal or professional challenges the group faced as they engaged in their collective professional learning around literacy teaching. Compromising was a common way the group navigated some of those tricky parts. For instance, three fifth-grade teachers participating in this study invited other teachers at their grade level to their lunchtime get-togethers. Having been assigned to fourth grade for the school year, Mia was not able to attend those get-togethers because she no longer had the same duty-free lunchtime period as Elise, Kristen, and Emma. At the beginning of the year, the group (with the exception of Mia) and the other fifth-grade teachers tried to work out a time to meet. Figuring out the logistics proved to be challenging for the group because the fifth-grade teachers themselves did not share a common preparation period, some of the teachers in the group were responsible for after-school events (e.g., the school play), and some teachers preferred not meeting during lunch. The act—or art—of compromising was apparent in an audio recording Emma shared with me from a lunchtime get-together in which the participating teachers attempted to work toward a compromise on the next meeting date:

Kristen: I feel like after-school [get-togethers] will be out during the [school] play. For now, do we want to meet every week at lunch? Do we want to meet every other?

Elise: Last year at lunch . . . we would just communicate, ‘Do we need to meet?’

Kristen: Let’s do that. (Emma, teacher-generated audio recording, September 25, 2018)

Ultimately, in this instance, it seemed as though the group wanted to respect each other’s time without infringing on it or asking too much from group members. The act of compromising,
when needed, enabled this group of teachers to preserve their relationships with each other and ultimately avoid jeopardizing the continuation of their collective professional learning. Although I argue that the act of compromising was a strength of this particular group, as I will discuss later in this chapter, it could also be a potential weakness.

**Self-Selecting**

Quite interestingly, over the course of the study, the participating teachers revealed their tendency to self-select what they contributed as a means of sustaining personal relationships with individuals in the group. This self-selecting seemed to involve being mindful of teachers’ limited time and considering how one’s actions or ideas offered might contribute to the good of the whole group. During my second conversation with Emma, I asked her whether she ever felt as though she could not mention things that were specific to the students she taught during lunchtime get-togethers. In this instance, Emma knew that teachers were meeting on their duty-free lunchtime period, and she wanted to be sure the conversation was relevant to all teachers in the group. For Emma, self-selecting was a way to ensure equity of sorts during the group’s get-togethers. She said, “I feel like if I bring that up and it’s only pertaining to me, then other people’s time is getting wasted. . . . I don’t feel that’s fair to them, because they’re taking their [lunch period] to talk and making it useful for everyone” (Emma, Interview 2, November 26, 2018). Even though she chose not to talk about something with the entire group, she later sought out an individual in the group to have a private conversation about her dilemma. Emma’s deliberate act of self-selecting meant she consciously prioritized her colleagues’ needs over her own. By doing so, she was able to help the group sustain the respectful relationships that had developed over time.
Participating teachers also expressed an awareness of how their actions were perceived by other teachers in the group. They recognized that, for the teachers in this group, teaching could be quite personal. In one instance, Kristen talked about why she felt the need to hold back at times when offering ideas or resources to the group. Specifically, she mentioned not wanting to be viewed as someone who had all the answers:

I think we don’t want to come across as being a know-it-all kind of person. I think that part of the personality of a teacher sometimes is it’s so personal, the way that you teach. It’s so much a part of you that sometimes you think, “When I share this, is this really something that someone else would want to do? Like this is me. This is how I do it, and I know that other people do things in their own way.” Sometimes I think you might hold back on certain things because you’re thinking people might not want all of that. (Kristen, Interview 2, October 17, 2018)

Similarly, Emma acknowledged that everyone in the group was at a different point in her learning about something literacy related and, therefore, might not be ready or open to changes in instructional practices. These examples pointed to the ways in which the group demonstrated foresight when considering how anything they offered to teachers in the group might be perceived and received by others.

**Nudging Others Along**

Another pattern that emerged from the data was the way in which participating teachers subtly nudged others in their group, and sometimes at their grade level, along in a certain direction. Again, this approach helped the group to sustain the relationships they had forged with each other, because this nudging entailed softening one’s language in a way that encouraged others to do or consider specific things without explicitly directing them to do those things or
how to do them. Rather, teachers masked their language in words like you could, maybe, and what if. For instance, Kristen invited teachers in the group as well as the three special education teachers at the grade level to edit a Google Doc that she created to help students’ organize their noticings when examining a mentor text (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. Google Docs invitation to edit a document sent by Kristen to the group.

Kristen’s use of one way and might signaled that she was not telling her grade-level colleagues what to do, how to do something, or which resources they should use. Rather, she was gently suggesting that the Google Doc she provided was something the teachers might consider using in the classroom. In offering an idea as something a teacher could do rather than should do or must do, Kristen was able to gently nudge her colleagues to consider trying something out in their classrooms without causing tension or feelings of resentment or inadequacy. Emma and Elise also engaged in this type of nudging as they collaborated on a shared Google spreadsheet during
an in-district Google professional development session. As they tried to negotiate what the student resource would look like, they hedged their language as they worked toward consensus in the group:

Emma: What is it that our . . . What are the “notes”? Is it “our thinking”? Maybe that’s what it is. Maybe we do, “What I notice. What I think.”

Elise: So you could call it that. “I notice” and “I think” rather than “notes.”

Emma: Maybe instead of the “summary,” it’s the “I notice,” and then the “I think” is the notes. (Elise, teacher-generated audio recording, September 21, 2018)

The participating teachers in this study used their language to position fellow teachers in the group, and on occasion teachers at their grade level, and nudge them to move in a specific direction. This act served to maintain the relationships that teachers had developed with each other and grow the group’s understandings around literacy instruction.

In sum, the analysis indicated that, in the group, individual relationships mattered as these teachers engaged in professional learning with each other. Importantly, I am not claiming that the friendships themselves were important to this group of teachers’ collective learning. However, the findings suggested that the key dimensions of the teachers’ relationships with each other that emerged from my analysis are worth attending to. In developing and sustaining relationships, navigating the tricky parts, self-selecting, and nudging others along, the group was able to put aside their own agendas and care for each other while engaging in their collective professional learning.

Discussion

This section focuses on a key theme developed out of this study’s data regarding the teachers’ relationships with each other while engaging in professional learning. This theme
highlighted the relational aspect of the group of teachers’ collective professional learning and indicated that caring for each other was integral to this work. At one level, the importance of interpersonal relationships in a learning collective might seem obvious; however, this study contributes a finer-grained and more nuanced understanding of personal relationships in the context of social learning theory. In fact, the data strongly suggested that relational aspects of teachers’ professional learning involved developing and sustaining relationships, navigating the tricky parts of these relationships (because relations between people are never one single kind of thing), self-selecting, and nudging others along. This finding added complexity to my conceptualization of grassroots professional learning in that teachers’ professional learning was not just about the learning—it was also about the relationships that supported the learning that teachers embarked on collectively. As previously discussed, this pattern indicated that the relational aspect of this group of teachers’ homegrown professional learning was related to and connected with the learning. As such, the relational piece of their professional learning was not something that could be whittled down to a single list of relational attributes or traits that could be referenced or used when planning for professional development in schools. Rather, the interpersonal connections they made in the context of teachers’ professional learning were rather nuanced and context dependent. In light of traditional notions of professional development and how it is practiced in schools, this finding pointed to the significance of organically developed personal relationships in the context of teachers’ professional learning.

An unexpected finding in this study was the ways in which these particular teachers grew their relationships with their colleagues in the group and the ways in which their relationships served as a necessary foundation for their ongoing professional learning and the life of their group. These results highlighted the fact that professional learning did not involve the
development of the relational aspect of teachers’ collective professional learning as a by-product of the group itself (e.g., Abbott, Lee, & Rossiter, 2018) or through a top-down approach propagated by administrators (e.g., Schaap & de Bruijn, 2018), as is often described in the current academic literature on professional learning communities. Rather, for this group of teachers, professional learning involved developing, nurturing, and sustaining relationships with each other in organic ways. Seemingly, the teachers did this by developing collegial friendships, connecting in different ways, and seeing and supporting others. Indeed, when examining the ways in which this group of teachers developed the relational aspect of their professional learning, I concluded that the literature on social learning theory did not adequately capture what was going on among the teachers in this particular group. Granted, Brown and Gray (1995) relayed the story of the Xerox workers in the 1980s who would “hang around the coffee pot, and swap stories from the field” (para. 3) as a way of “coproducing insights” (para. 5). However, the findings of this study indicated that teachers were not just hanging out and “swapping stories” for the purposes of cocreating new understandings. Rather, the findings suggested that this group’s professional learning involved a genuine caring for each other as evidenced by the various ways in which teachers developed and nurtured personal relationships with others. For instance, Mia suggested that the relationships the teachers developed with each other in the group were just as important as those they developed with their students. Despite Brown and Gray’s (1995) claim that that learning is truly about participation in a group or community, I would argue that this group of teachers was able to engage in professional learning together because they developed particular kinds of relationships in this group organically and over time. Simply participating in this group was not what supported all the professional learning the teachers reported throughout this study. It was the personal relationships in the group, as
described earlier, that truly mattered in this context of their professional learning. Thus, this finding seemed to align with the relational aspect of professional learning as it is described in the literature on instructional coaching. Instructional coaching is a form of school-based professional development in which a formally appointed coach provides instructional support for teachers as a way to improve instructional practices and student achievement (Lowenhaupt, McKinney, & Reeves 2014). In fact, scholars have previously identified relationships as the foundation of the literacy coach–teacher relationship (see, for example, Ferguson, 2013; Ippolito, 2010; Lowenhaupt et al., 2014; Smith, 2012). More specifically, researchers have pointed to instructional coaches’ use of symbolic gestures (e.g., being friendly and helpful) to develop and support the relational aspect of their work with others (Lowenhaupt et al., 2014). However, the impetus for relationship building between a formally appointed instructional coach and a teacher is quite different from its manifestation in a self-forming group of teachers. In this study, the teachers were not using symbolic gestures as a way to build relationships and subsequently improve instructional practices or enact schoolwide change. Instead, it was through the sustained development of said personal relationships that this group of teachers was able to practice professional learning in meaningful and purposeful ways. This finding alone casts doubt on any claims that assume teachers can be coached or converted into a learning community by dint of simply putting them together in a group. In short, this finding underscored the importance of the ways in which teachers developed personal relationships organically in the context of their professional learning.

Another finding concerning the theme of putting down our roots, or the relational aspect of teachers’ professional learning, concerned how this group navigated the tricky parts of their professional learning. Throughout the teacher-generated audio recordings from the group’s
informal get-togethers and interview transcripts, statements made by teachers and verbal exchanges between teachers illustrated the compromises participating teachers made when they encountered challenges. For instance, these teachers frequently compromised on when they informally met as a group. Unlike what I found in the study, the literature on social learning theory typically focuses on the intragroup interactions and conversations through which learning is constructed (Brown, 2002; Brown & Adler, 2008; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). In this view, learning is situated in these context-specific interactions. I would argue, however, that this conceptualization portrays an idealized version of these interactions and conversations. In essence, this finding from my study suggests that what is missing from the body of literature on social learning theory is an acknowledgment of the tricky parts of this learning and a discussion of how individuals navigate the thornier parts of their learning, particularly when the personal relationships in the group are challenged or strained. Turning again to the literature on instructional coaching, researchers have previously identified how instructional coaches overcame challenges they faced in their coaching work. Some of these interrelated strategies included using communication strategies to deal with teacher resistance (i.e., only offering feedback when requested by a teacher or listening to teachers’ experiences in Lynch & Ferguson, 2010). Additionally, literacy coaches were often called upon by teachers themselves to mediate conversations when they faced a problem (Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010). However, because the power dynamics between an instructional coach and a teacher are quite different from the dynamics between and among teachers in a group, this literature did not align with this study’s finding that this group of teachers negotiated and ultimately compromised when faced with challenges. Unlike literacy coaches depicted in the academic literature, the participating teachers made compromises for the long-term good of the group when they encountered a tricky part of
their professional learning. Therefore, I argue that this finding offers a more realistic glimpse into the imperfect nature of professional learning in a collective, particularly in its recognition of how a group of teachers navigates unanticipated challenges in the context of their learning.

Another finding regarding the relational aspect of this group’s professional learning was the way in which teachers self-selected. This study found that the participating teachers’ self-selecting took the form of considering what would be most useful for or supportive of the group in the context of the limited time available to meet with each other. Similar acts of self-selecting have been described in the literature on teacher communities. For instance, scholars have suggested that individuals in an emergent community are often inclined to “play community,” which is often marked by a “surface friendliness, hypervigilant never to intrude on issues of personal space,” and an “illusion of consensus” (Grossman et al., 2001, p. 955). As Grossman and colleagues explained, the group’s purposeful avoidance of conflict in a pseudocommunity creates a space where individuals can ascribe their own meaning or significance to the conversations without everyone in the group having to agree on a single idea. Although the findings of my study uncovered how individual teachers avoided encroaching on the group’s shared time together by withholding ideas or information from the group, I would argue that their purpose in doing so was to maximize their limited time together and thus represented a strength of this group over the short time (a time after the group had already been established) during which this study took place. However, it is worth acknowledging that self-selecting could also be a potential weakness. By intentionally avoiding difficult conversations or conflict, the group might have jeopardized the long-term sustainability and authenticity of their collective learning. As I previously discussed, this group of teachers found ways to navigate the challenges they faced in their pursuit of their collective learning. In my study, teachers keenly recognized that
their colleagues were giving up their duty-free lunches to meet informally with the group, and so group participants wanted to be sure that what they offered to others would be useful for the group as a whole. Certainly, the group might have avoided conflict in the process. However, the data do not suggest that this was the intention of the group as they engaged in self-selecting. In fact, I argue that the group was not “playing community” as much as they were being hyperaware of others’ time (and the group’s limited time together) and, in doing so, prioritized actions or offerings that might contribute to the greater good of the group.

One of the findings in this study indicated that teachers nudged each other along as they engaged in professional learning. This finding suggested that teachers gently nudged each other toward considering instructional practices or resources without mandating they do so. In essence, when teachers nudged others along, they put their own understandings into action as a way to help their colleagues. The academic literature on social learning theory highlights similar interactions through which individuals can share resources and know-how with others (Brown & Adler, 2008; Knobel & Kalman, 2016 Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Thomas & Brown, 2011). Specifically, Brown and Adler (2008) discussed the success of study groups in which students assume the role of a teacher to help others in the group “benefit from their understanding” (p. 18). Similarly, Thomas and Brown (2011) suggested that even though no one is formally designated as the teacher in a group, anyone can assume the role of a mentor. In their view, repeated interactions among individuals in a group serve as a “peer amplifier” (p. 51) because through these repeated interactions each person in the group contributes various resources and ideas to help facilitate learning. In my study, it appeared that when teachers tried to “nudge each other along,” they were, in a way, mentoring their colleagues. However, because the teachers in this study were nudging others along, rather than simply teaching them, they were
able to encourage others to try out or consider different ideas or resources without adding pressure for them to do so. I would argue that this finding provides a more nuanced and softer take on mentorship that goes beyond social learning in that it recognizes the relational aspect of taking on the role of a teacher or mentor.

Conclusion of This Section on Putting Down Our Roots

The findings discussed in this section indicated the significance of personal relationships in the context of professional learning. Although scholars have typically focused on the group as a whole in the context of social learning, they have by and large failed to capture the truly relational aspect of individual teachers’ collective professional learning as it unfolded in my study. The key dimensions of these relationships among the participating teachers in this study—I argue—were essential to their professional learning as evidenced by the ways teachers developed and sustained relationships, navigated the tricky parts, self-selected, and nudged others along. Therefore, this study suggests that the dimensions of teachers’ personal relationships in this group were nuanced, interconnected, and grounded in who these particular individuals were in the context of the group. Having discussed the individual relationships in this group, in the next section I turn to discuss the particular group dynamics that helped to sustain the group’s professional learning.

Coming (and Staying) Together

In the first section of this chapter, I described and discussed how the personal relationships that individuals developed with each other in the group were integral to how they engaged in their collective professional learning. In this section, I describe and discuss the well-being of the group itself, particularly in the context of how the group came together—and stayed together over time. Whereas the former section shed light on the relational and interpersonal
aspects of the group’s professional learning, this section focuses on the teachers’ commitment to the welfare of the group itself. Before presenting the data related to this theme, I must acknowledge that my positionality as a female researcher who researched a group of women undoubtedly shaped my analysis of the data. Certainly, the data suggested that there were “female” ways of being that were relevant to how the group sustained their learning over time. However, I am not interested in simply reinforcing gender stereotypes (e.g., female teachers as nurturers) through my presentation and discussion of this theme. In fact, many scholars have studied mixed-gender groups of teachers and identified ways in which they committed to the well-being of the group itself (Abbott et al., 2018; Bruce & Easley, 2000; Gee, 2017; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Ndunda, Van Sickle, Perry, & Capelloni, 2017), which suggests that this finding might transcend gender stereotypes. That being said, through analyzing the data I collected for this study I identified a number of patterns that shed light on what held the group itself together and helped to sustain their professional learning over time. This finding is clearly at odds with Stigler and Hiebert’s (1999) finding that the American view of teaching tends to be that it is a private activity. In what follows, I describe how sticking together, throwing it out there, passing the headset, and thinking beyond day-to-day instruction provided insight into this group’s collective obligation to themselves and their students.

**Sticking Together**

In the context of this study, coming together as a collective involved sticking together as a group. For this group of teachers, sticking together was essential to the group’s well-being. The group’s appreciation for each other’s distinct interests foregrounded their sense of shared responsibility to each other. Because these teachers recognized each other as individuals with unique passions, they understood that their collective professional learning involved an ebb and
flow of sorts—taking the lead when it was relevant to the situation or purpose at hand and inviting others to take the lead when it was not. Underlying this group’s noticeable enactment of collective responsibility was a sense of joy that comes from being able to support others in the group and to accept support from others when it was needed. I address this latter point later in this section.

Although it was not surprising that the participating teachers in this study spoke of their shared passion for teaching and learning, what was notable was their recognition and acceptance of the fact that the group was not uniformly passionate about the content and processes they taught to students. In this way, it seemed that the group was able to mesh well together because of their distinct passions. It was evident throughout the interviews that the group’s investment in their collective professional learning was embedded in their own and others’ self-described enthusiasm for specific content and material. Often during my interviews with participants, teachers spoke not only of their own passions but also of their colleagues’ passions. For example, when Elise referenced her passion for social studies, she also spoke of one of Kristen’s passion for reading:

I love Social Studies so . . . I’m probably the most, I would say, maybe even emotionally invested in it. I probably have a lot of input because it’s a high interest for me, and I think everybody knows that. . . . I would say that’s my thing. And Kristen does a lot with reading. . . . It seems to be a good mix to work that way. (Elise, Interview 2, October 28, 2018)

As this example illustrates, the group recognized that each of the teachers had her own “thing,” or passion for the various school content areas she taught. Although my original conceptualization of grassroots professional learning recognized the possibility of a group’s
shared interests, it did not take into account the different passions that might exist in the group and how these differences might strengthen the group. Based on this finding, I would argue that the group functioned as well as it did because teachers were personally invested in different aspects of their teaching and learning and brought these to the group’s shared focus on literacy instruction. As I will discuss later in this section, these distinct passions also helped to ensure there was not a single designated leader of the group and seemed to further strengthen the cohesiveness of this group.

In addition to being aware of and appreciating each other’s shared, and distinct, passions, participants seemed to feel a sense of responsibility to the group. In other words, it appeared that teachers were committed to the group’s professional learning even when they felt that the focus of their collective learning did not necessarily apply to them or their teaching contexts at that specific time. Over the course of my interviews, the participating teachers regularly discussed their commitment to the group itself. Kristen even described the group as “kind of a team” and added that the teachers in the group “all have each other’s backs” (Kristen, Interview 2, October 17, 2018). As expressed by the teachers on this “team,” this sense of responsibility was coupled with not wanting to disappoint the group (by not showing up to get-togethers, as one example) and a commitment to finding ways to contribute to the group’s learning. Underlying this sense of responsibility was a sense of reciprocity, or the desire to both offer and receive support, in the group. Recalling her first days working with the group, Mia admitted, “I felt guilty because they [colleagues in the group] were doing so many different things and then they would share them with me. I was kind of like, ‘Oh, gosh. I’m not contributing, I need to figure this out’” (Mia, Interview 2, December 14, 2018). As noted in the previous examples, a sense of responsibility
for contributing to the group (and not exploiting others’ know-how and understandings) was essential to this group’s well-being.

For this group of teachers, the notion of joyful reciprocity in terms of their commitment to the group’s learning was apparent throughout our conversations. Although these particular teachers described feelings of self-satisfaction when they offered others in the group something that was useful or helpful to them, they also expressed gratitude for the day-to-day support the group provided to them. In this way, teachers’ sense of responsibility to the group was also clearly tied to an appreciation for what others shared in the group. As Mia so eloquently offered, “And really, my thought process in anything is what can we do, as teachers, to help each other make the day-to-day process easier?” (Mia, Interview 3, December 22, 2018). In slightly different terms, Elise spoke of feeling a “sense of accountability and wanting it [social studies curriculum units she wrote] to work well” for the group (Elise, Interview 2, October 28, 2018). Certainly, the data suggested that this group of teachers not only appreciated the help they received from their colleagues but also valued the opportunity to support each other with their day-to-day responsibilities.

In summary, the data indicated that this group of teachers stuck together, or committed to supporting each other as a group, as they engaged in professional learning. This dedication to the group manifested itself in the way these teachers recognized and benefited from each other’s distinct passions, felt a sense of responsibility to the group to ensure no inadvertent exploitation was happening, and in turn, experienced joy as they stuck together and supported each other in this work.
Passing the Headset

Another key finding related to how the participating teachers functioned as a group was the way in which they recognized and made space for the expertise (i.e., the knowledge, experience, know-how) teachers brought to the group. In this way, there was an ebb and flow of teachers in the group stepping up at different times to practice leadership in the group at various points in their professional learning. Thus, the term *passing the headset* was used by Kristen to describe these inner workings of the group as she explained an image she found to represent how the group worked together (see Figure 4.2).

![Figure 4.2. Representation of group shared by Kristen prior to second semistructured interview.](https://www.clipartof.com/portfolio/nlshop/illustration/happy-group-of-business-stick-people-sitting-around-a-table-in-a-meeting-44136.html)

Additionally, she offered this thought during our second interview:
“I feel like there is no head of our group and that depending upon what the topic is or the week is or whatever the need is, that someone is leading, someone has the headset. So the headset kinda gets passed depending upon what it is.” (Kristen, Interview 2, October 17, 2018)

For this group of elementary teachers, passing the headset was a context-dependent and fluid process tied to the focus of the group’s professional learning at a given moment. That is, the group did not have one designated, permanent leader. Rather, the group passed the headset when the context called for particular expertise. Although it was quite rare for any of these teachers to talk about themselves as experts, they did refer to each other as such. In fact, all teachers in the group recognized each other’s expertise and referred to their colleagues in the group as the go-to social studies person (Elise), word study person (Mia), technology/special education person (Emma), or reading and writing person (Kristen). Unsurprisingly, these teachers typically sought out a particular individual when seeking particular bits of information or resources, and they admitted to learning different things from different participants. Therefore, I would argue that these teachers were able to collectively offer different perspectives or approaches to teaching because of these distinct specialties and that, as a result, the group’s learning was all the richer for this diversity of knowledge and know-how. This group was no echo chamber; neither was it committed to a particular orthodoxy, which can all too often be the hallmark of literacy instruction in schools (e.g., scripted learning).

For example, sometimes the headset was passed when a teacher in the group assumed responsibility for rolling out something new (i.e., curriculum units, district initiatives) to not only the teachers in the group but the other teachers in her particular grade level as well. Once, Elise explained how Mia used her understandings and experiences to roll out to her colleagues a
document she created of word study activities. After the group had attended in-district professional development on word study, Mia had taken it upon herself to create Google Slides outlining teaching resources for teachers within and beyond her group. Consequently, she was able to step up and lead the group when the situation called for her know-how. Elise explained how the practice benefited the group: “So Mia, who is experienced with word study, she put together a document that had, ‘Step by step, here’s a word meaning activity.’ . . . So she broke them down into really specific ways to have word study and share that with all of us. That was like that was my Bible through word study” (Elise, Interview 1, August 20, 2018). In this example, the headset was passed to Mia, so that the group could walk, step-by-step, through the new word study practices they were introduced to during professional development and begin to make sense of them in the contexts of their classrooms. Being passed the headset by the group enabled individual teachers to assume the role of an expert at times when the group’s collective learning called for their know-how.

In sum, passing the headset was fundamental to the ways in which the teachers in this study functioned as a group. At various points in their professional learning, teachers took advantage of each other’s understandings of content, curriculum, or instructional practices. I would argue that the well-being of this particular group depended on making the space for others to put their expertise and know-how to use in the context of the group and their grade level.

**Throwing It Out There**

Given that there was no clear leader mandating or telling others in the group what to do, the group recognized that their roles did not involve telling others how to teach the district curriculum. In this way, the group recognized it was up to their colleagues to decide what to do with the ideas, information, or resources offered by others. For this group of teachers, throwing
it out there was not simply pooling resources for the greater good of the group. In fact, the data suggested that, at the group level, teachers offered ideas and resources to each other without taking it personally if others tried, used, or even discarded those ideas and resources. This finding differed from the notion of nudging others along, which I discussed earlier. As I described, nudging others along unfolded at the individual level of relationships in the group and focused on the softening of language as a way to encourage others to consider something differently or try something new. However, throwing it out there in the group involved teachers clearly understanding that they could not force a colleague to use the resources or ideas they offered. Rather, they would throw it out there, or put it out there for others to choose (or not choose) to use. These teachers readily admitted that throwing it out there was a common practice in the group. Essentially, the mind-set the group adopted in the context of offering ideas and resources to their colleagues was, “If you like it, great. If you don’t, you don’t have to use it” (Elise, Interview 1, August 20, 2018). The group’s accounts of throwing it out there appeared pretty selfless and not competitive. That is, teachers did not throw things out there to win high ratings or draw attention to their expertise and know-how in the group.

This mentality was apparent in an email Emma had written to the group regarding an idea for supporting writers in the historical fiction curriculum unit, which was a framework that outlined the scope of skills to be taught at a particular time in the school year (see Figure 4.3).

Hi Ladies,

So I’m really looking to help my struggling writers with ideas for our Historical Unit. No, LOL… I am not there yet, but I just wanted to run this by you. I was looking to find at least 4-5 historical picture books in different time periods to help with these students. They can be read alouds or read independently. The issue might be they their knowledge or understanding of historical events. I think they could use these events and a different character, and write the story in their perspective. I know we can talk about this another time, but I just wanted to throw that out there. I’ll be looking for books at Brooks’ Library.

Figure 4.3. Email sent by Emma to the group.
Whereas this example suggested that Emma threw an idea out to the group that might be helpful to others, Kristen offered a slightly different perspective on why she tended to throw things out there. She explained that in her earlier years at Brooks School, she did not want to be perceived as “someone who was trying to upstage things that had been done in the past in the same way for a long time” (Kristen, Interview 2, October 17, 2018), so she made it clear in her emails to the group that she was simply suggesting an idea for the group. Despite no longer feeling this way, Kristen admitted to continuing to preface her emails in a way that made it clear to the other teachers that she was simply offering another possibility. When sharing a document in Google Docs, she explained, “I’ll write in the email, ‘I just created this. Thinking about using this. If you want to use this, great. If you don’t want to use that, that’s okay.’ And then I just share it out” (Kristen, Interview 2, October 17, 2018). As evidenced in these examples, this group of teachers made it clear to others in the group that they were offering possibilities, not prescriptions for teaching. Underlying the group’s practice of throwing it out there was a sensitivity that recognized how personal teaching might be for the teachers in the group.

Because teachers regularly threw ideas out there to each other (without expecting everyone to use them in the same way, or even use them at all), the group was clearly at a place where they felt comfortable enough to do their “own thing” in the classroom. For instance, Mia indicated that when others in the group throw out ideas, “[you] pull what you think is going to work best with the population [of students] that you’re working with or just pull what I think is the coolest part of it” (Mia, Interview 2, December 14, 2018). Mia’s comments provided evidence that teachers in the group created a space where choosing to do what they thought best for their teaching context was accepted—even after others threw ideas or resources out there.
Similarly, Kristen acknowledged that the group was in a place where they no longer felt as though everyone in the group had to be teaching the same thing on the same day in the same way:

We’re at a point now where we can go back and forth and say things that we kind of agree with or don’t agree with in a way. I also think that part of the reason why we get along so well, and why everything has been very smooth, is that we don’t always all at the end of the day agree to do everything in [the same way]. . . since we talk about it and are mostly on common ground and then move into our classrooms and teach in a way that we think is best, without I think any judgment. (Kristen, Interview 2, October 17, 2018)

By sharing ideas and resources in this way, this group created a space where individual teachers could pursue their own teaching and learning in ways that were meaningful and relevant to them and in the best interest of the students. Over the course of this study, this practice seemed to be a strength of this group of teachers because they were so mindful of each other and the students while implementing the district curriculum. However, I am not arguing that this practice is always a strength—particularly if teachers are doing their own thing whether or not it is good for students. Still, it is important to recognize that by throwing things out there to others, this group of teachers was able to respect each other’s teaching contexts and make instructional choices that did benefit their students.

In sum, the group’s well-being depended upon the way in which the group shared ideas and resources out there to others. Since those offerings were not intended to be prescriptive or to gain reputation points as a sharer, individual teachers could make decisions based on what they thought best for their particular teaching contexts. I would argue that the group was able to work well together, as the teachers described, precisely because they could be flexible about how they
taught the district curriculum in their respective classrooms and because they did not take offense if no one took up their shared resources.

**Thinking Beyond Day-to-Day Instruction**

Although throwing it out there helped the group support each other with their day-to-day instruction, the data also indicated that this group of teachers focused on the big picture of teaching and learning—something larger than what unfolded in their classrooms from day to day. Again, this seemed to be a strong, common thread that held the group together. In fact, the teachers in the group all recognized that professional learning in this context involved evolving as learners themselves, wanting students to be successful, and wanting to “do the right thing.”

One such commonality among the group was the way in which they viewed learning as a process. Given this principle, they recognized that, as educators, they were continually evolving and growing in their understanding and instructional practice. In describing this perspective on the professional learning in which they engaged, teachers described how the group was “still trying to figure this all out” (Mia, Interview 1, August 23, 2018), “always learning, wanting to grow” (Emma, Interview 1, August 24, 2018), and eager to “continu[e] to pursue and push your thinking” (Mia, Interview 3, December 22, 2018). From the teachers’ reporting, it appeared as though the group’s organic evolution as learners seemed to encompass using what they already knew and simultaneously pursuing opportunities in which they could continue to grow their own thinking beyond literacy instruction. For instance, Emma remarked, “We’re here to learn. Not just necessarily learn facts, but to learn about yourself. To learn about other people” (Emma, Interview 1, August 24, 2018). Throughout the data, this group’s view of learning as a process appeared on many occasions. In assuming this wider perspective of learning, the group was able to engage in professional learning through which they continued to evolve and grow.
As the data suggested, part of what sustained the group’s collective learning was their desire to support students’ growth and successes. Teachers reported that this shared commitment was apparent from the beginnings of the group itself. During our interviews, teachers spoke of the group’s desire to support student growth as they pursued their own professional learning and expressed disappointment in themselves when they did not feel that students were successful. For instance, Kristen spoke of the tension she often felt when students were not successful with something she taught them in spite of modifications she may have made to the instruction or assignment. She admitted, “I feel like I’m not perfect. . . . Sometimes I . . . feel like it’s a little bit of my failure when they’re not really totally getting it, but I’m getting better at being able to appreciate the parts of things that kids . . . achieve” (Kristen, Interview 3, December 10, 2018). Mia had a particularly interesting perspective on the importance of continuing her own professional learning, having returned to teaching in the district where she had attended school as a child. Having seen how students’ learning needs have changed over the years, Mia offered, “I think that, if we put a hold on our learning as educators . . . we would be doing an injustice to the kids.” As evidenced by Mia’s statement, the group’s learning was not just about supporting students instructionally from day to day. I would argue that, from the perspective of the group, it was also about a responsibility to the students—one that the group took quite seriously. Clearly, as the data indicated, engaging in sustained professional learning was necessary for the group to meet their students’ diverse needs.

Similarly, the group was adamant about wanting to do the right thing for themselves and their students. The data pointed to this group of teachers wanting to teach effectively and, in turn, to do the right thing for the students and for themselves as learners. Again, the group was thinking beyond their day-to-day instruction and the daily experiences of their students. In fact,
the group was looking at their practices and learning from a broader perspective. When I asked about the group’s overall process of learning, Elise explained, “We want to be thorough. We all want to be thorough. We all want to do it [teaching] well” (Elise, Interview 2, October 28, 2018). Emma corroborated this feeling when she explained during an interview that working with the group made professional learning feel easier. When asked to elaborate, she responded, “I think that everybody wants to know they’re doing the right thing. I think that’s our goal. We want to do the right thing” (Emma, Interview 1, August 24, 2018). These examples—and many more like them in the data set—indicate that the teachers in the group were thinking beyond day-to-day instruction and focusing on the big picture of teaching and learning. In this context, it was clear that the group shared a sense of wanting to do right by their students in the larger scope of their professional learning and teaching.

In sum, my analysis strongly suggested this group’s professional learning involved ways of coming—and staying—together as a group. Although I anticipated that the teachers in this group might share passions for teaching, learning, and literacy instruction, the findings of this study suggested that the group shared a collective obligation to themselves (as learners) and to their students. By sticking together, throwing it out there, passing the headset, and focusing on the big picture of teaching and learning, these teachers were able to come together in ways that helped them sustain their collective learning over time.

Discussion

This section focuses on a second theme of this study generated by my analysis regarding the group’s well-being as participating teachers each engaged in their collective professional learning. My findings indicated that coming (and staying) together as a group involved a collective obligation to themselves as learners and to their students (also as learners). When I
paid close attention to the ways in which the group was sticking together, throwing it out there, passing the headset, and trying to contribute to something larger, a more complex picture of what held this group together and how they sustained their professional learning over time emerged from the data.

One pattern in this study indicated the different dimensions of how teachers stuck together throughout their collective professional learning. Although they shared passions about teaching and learning, this group also created a space in which they were able to honor each teacher’s distinct professional interests and passions. I would argue that this appreciation seemed to strengthen the group’s collective obligation to each other and contributed to the joy they felt as they engaged in the give-and-take of this collective learning. In essence, it appeared that this collective responsibility derived from what scholars like Thomas and Brown (2011) suggested is an individual’s personal investment in the group. In their view, because a collective, or a fluid group, is composed of people having common values and beliefs, individuals typically have a strong sense of personal investment in the group because the very nature of the group is participatory. In this study, it seems that this group of teachers stuck together because they were invested in the group itself. However, I would argue that Thomas and Brown’s (2011) use of the term personal investment invokes a monetary metaphor that does accurately not capture the nature of this group. For this group of teachers, sticking together was not transactional. Rather, I found that the group sincerely appreciated the understandings and experiences others brought to the group and were eager to contribute in meaningful ways and engage in this learning over time. In fact, Surowiecki (2005) has long written about the value of diversity in groups. He suggested that diversity in thinking among the participants in a group yielded richer decision making and helped the group avoid falling into a single, shared mind-set.
trap. I argue that this dimension of a healthy group of learners seems to be downplayed in the literature on social learning theory. Therefore, this finding underscores the importance of diversity in a group, particularly in the way that this group of teachers was able to manage that diversity without animosity or jealousy and simply appreciate what they each added to the mix.

Another finding regarding how this group of teachers engaged in professional learning was the way in which the group passed the headset (that is, handed over leadership or acknowledged know-how) to one another. This finding illustrated that that leadership was not permanently relegated to a specific individual. Rather, the group explicitly recognized that individuals brought their own understandings of content or instructional approaches and choose to turn to specific individuals when seeking out particular bits of information or resources. The act of passing the headset enabled individual teachers to assume responsibility for helping their colleagues based on their recognized know-how. In this context, the group seemed to have “constructed other teachers as leaders according to the types of expertise other teachers possess” (Spillane, Hallet, & Diamond, 2003, p. 5). In the context of their study of instructional leadership in Chicago elementary schools, Spillane and colleagues found that teachers were attuned to the knowledge, teaching experiences, or educational background that they considered their colleagues to offer to others in the school. Likewise, the findings of my study showed that teachers in this group constructed each other as experts based on the aforementioned associations. However, what Spillane, Hallet, and Diamond’s (2003) work failed to capture was the implications of these constructions of leadership in the day-to-day lives of teachers. Therefore, the findings of my study offer a glimpse into what this dimension of distributed leadership might look like in the context of teachers’ daily practices. In the case of this study, individual teachers assumed leadership in the group when they were eager to do so—and
comfortable doing so—in the context of a given curriculum unit. For instance, having spent hours upon hours researching the content for a new social studies unit, Elise meticulously walked her colleagues through the world religions unit. This study’s findings suggested that not only did teachers construct each other as experts, but they also acted on that know-how and took up leadership roles in the context of their professional learning when the context (or the group) called for it.

This study also found that group participants offered ideas and resources to each other without expecting that the recipients would use them at that exact moment or in the same way as the contributors used them. For this group of teachers, throwing it out there served as a way to make resources and information that they found useful available to their colleagues in the group without prescribing or mandating them. The act of throwing it out there involved a sensitivity of sorts in that the group recognized how personal teaching could be and created a judgment-free space wherein teachers could choose to (or choose not to) access new ideas and resources offered by others and subsequently make instructional decisions that would work best for their contexts. In this context, it appeared that this group of teachers recognized the demand-side view of learning. In the context of social learning theory, Brown and Duguid (2017) described this view as learning on demand. In their view, people learn effectively when they have a need and when resources are readily available. Additionally, they referred to this type of learning—positively—as “stolen knowledge,” emphasizing that learning should not be not forced upon individuals, but instead encouraged by “provoking the need and making the resources available for people to ‘steal’” (Brown & Duguid, 2017, “Learning on Demand,” para. 3). In this study, it was evident that teachers regularly threw out possible resources to others when they came across something that might be useful to the group. There was no expectation in the group that their
colleagues would act upon what had been offered. That being said, the group did appear to be
provoking a need for specific resources as evidenced by the way they regularly threw out said
resources. For instance, Kristen reported that when she shared something with her colleagues via
e-mail, she made it clear that she was simply offering that resource for others to use, adapt, or
ignore. In other words, the group created low-pressure opportunities for others to “steal” these
resources. Beyond simply offering resources for others in the group to “steal,” teachers who
follow the learning-on-demand principle also, I would argue, foster an atmosphere of
transparency around the instruction actually going on in their classrooms. In this way, learning
on demand provided the group with an honest sneak-peek of what was actually happening in
each other’s classroom and served as a way to sustain the group’s welfare in that what was being
used was not being hoarded away or hidden by teachers. This finding suggested that, unlike
Brown and Duguid’s (2017) conceptualization, learning on demand in the context of this study
also involved the group being straightforward with others about their instructional practices and
their reasons for sharing specific resources.

The last major finding concerning the group dynamics of these teachers as they engaged
in professional learning together was the way in which they committed to something larger than
their day-to-day instruction. In this study, teachers considered themselves to be evolving as
learners, wanted the students to be successful, and were eager to do the right thing. As
previously described, the literature on social learning theory defines a collective as a fluid group
of individuals who typically share “values and beliefs about the world and their place in it”
(Thomas & Brown, 2011, p. 56). My study indicated that this group of teachers did, in fact,
share a vision of themselves as learners as well as a vision of what they wanted for their students
and themselves. Despite individual teachers viewing others in the group as having expertise in
specific areas, the group also collectively constructed a shared perspective on learning and learners. Thus, this finding aligned with the literature on social learning theory in which scholars posited that since this shared perspective is based on the local context of the group, it supports the work the group engages in together (Brown & Duguid, 2017). However, I would argue that scholars’ take on a collective does not go far enough. For this group of teachers, collectively sharing ideas and beliefs about teaching, learning, and students was not just a common thread for the group. Rather, this shared perspective informed and helped sustain the professional learning the group engaged in over time. In fact, the group’s shared beliefs about teaching and being teachers seemed to underlie everything they did as a group.

Conclusion of This Section on Coming (and Staying) Together

The findings of this section call attention to the dynamics that were in play as this group of teachers engaged in professional learning together. At a group level, the teachers stuck together, threw it out there, passed the headset, and tried to contribute to something larger. I argue that these dynamics were driven by the context of the group and therefore were not a prescriptive, one-size-fits-all list. Rather, these dynamics sustained the group in their professional learning because the dynamics were true to the local context. In sum, this section focused on the theme of coming (and staying together), which provided insight into the inner workings of the group of participating teachers. In particular, this finding shed light on the ways in which this group of teachers stuck together, threw it out there, passed the headset, and tried to contribute to something larger. The next section focuses on the learning teachers engaged in as a group and as individuals.
Getting Messy With Our Learning

In the first two sections of this chapter, I described the relational aspect of the teachers’ professional learning as well as the dynamics that were in play at the group level. In this section, I describe and discuss the interplay between the individual and the group, particularly in terms of the learning the group engaged in jointly and as individuals in the group. As noted in Chapter 2, learning can be defined as the collective construction of knowledge over time and, in this particular case, as deliberate inquiry into literacy instructional practices with a goal of bringing about change at the classroom or school level (cf. Ball & Cohen, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999b; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010). Although I initially hypothesized that grassroots professional learning would entail teachers constructing knowledge in a sustained manner and in a way that was relevant to their context, the findings of this study suggest that learning was not as neat and clear-cut as it is often represented as being in the current academic literature. In the case of the participating teachers in this study, their learning process was not linear and not always focused on whole-group learning. Rather, it was messy and at times often quite individualized in the context of the larger collective. In what follows I describe how professional learning for this group of teachers involved an ongoing ebb and flow of accessing a network of resources, considering what might be useful to others, and trying things out.

Accessing a Network of Resources

It was certainly unsurprising that this group of teachers accessed a network of resources—including Twitter, books, colleagues, and ideas from previously attended formal professional development sessions—as they engaged in professional learning together. However, what was notable was this particular group of teachers’ ongoing process of
accessing a variety of resources for different purposes. For the teachers in this study, this process supported individual teachers’ professional learning as well as the learning of their colleagues.

One platform commonly discussed among the teachers in this study was Twitter. Although all the participating teachers mentioned accessing Twitter in our interviews, their use of the platform was not uniform across the group. Among the teachers in this study, Kristen and Mia seemed to use Twitter in similar ways. For them, Twitter was a tool that helped them connect with educators or other professionals in education and stay abreast of what was happening in the field. These two teachers described instances of following educators on Twitter who they believed shared a similar philosophy of teaching and learning, or seeking out educators on Twitter who had a particular expertise. For instance, when Mia was looking for ways to support some of the student readers in her room with digital texts, she turned to Twitter. She explained, “There are certain people . . . that I knew . . . their expertise was in a particular area . . . I would follow [them] or read through their blogs at times, and I use[d] Twitter as my venue to get there” (Mia, Interview 3, December 22, 2018). Interestingly, other teachers in this group recognized that Kristen and Mia used Twitter to connect with educators, even if they, themselves, did not always use the platform in the same way. For example, Emma recounted a conversation in the hallway in which Kristen specifically described something she found on Twitter that she planned to use in her teaching that day; Kristen suggested someone whom Emma might follow. For some of the teachers in this group, a primary use of Twitter was to connect with other educators and to stay connected with recent happenings related to education and literacy teaching.
Although connecting with educators was one way this group used Twitter, or benefited from others using the social media platform, teachers also used Twitter to purposely seek out resources or ideas that might be available on the platform. Although Kristen admittedly assumed the role of a bystander in Twitter chats, she explained that in doing so she was able to gather practical ideas from other educators. Kristen explained, “I never post anything in a Twitter chat, but I’ll kind of lurk and see what they’re posting or who else is in the chat” (Kristen, Interview 3, December 10, 2018). Even though she chose not to participate in the chats themselves, Kristen popped into them from time to time to check out the resources or ideas that educators she followed made available through the platform. Although accessing resources on Twitter was often a solitary activity for some of the teachers in this group, they subsequently offered any resources or ideas that might be useful to their colleagues within and beyond the group. In these instances, teachers recognized that the value of these resources extended beyond their own learning to include their colleagues and educators outside their local context. In one instance, Kristen described how she retweeted a resource from Twitter if she felt it was something that would benefit educators outside her group. She recounted in an interview, “If I think it’s something that other people could use, then I’ll retweet it. If there’s something really good, especially good resources and things like that, then I’ll retweet it” (Kristen, Interview 3, December 10, 2018). For Kristen, Twitter was a tool that she used not only to find information and resources for herself but also to support her colleagues and other educators, who often extended well beyond the local context in which she taught.

Purposely seeking out resources on Twitter was not the only way teachers identified those resources. In fact, the teachers in this group reported falling upon stuff (i.e., resources, ideas, materials) they thought would be useful without having purposely sought it out. Often this
entailed routinely checking one’s Twitter feed (often daily) and stumbling upon something an individual teacher thought she or the group might use now or later. Exemplifying this process of falling upon a resource on Twitter (and then offering it to her colleagues), Kristen shared with me an email she sent to the group that included a Twitter link (see Figure 4.4).

![Email sent from Kristen to the group.](image)

*Figure 4.4. Email sent from Kristen to the group.*

In an email exchange about this artifact, Kristen explained, “This was not something that I was specifically looking for, but when I saw it, it made me think that it would be something I could
use this for this unit” (Kristen, email correspondence, October 21, 2018). Since teachers were not actively seeking out these particular resources, they reported that they did not always use these resources immediately, which appeared to align with the way in which this group of teachers also threw out ideas and resources to each other. Two teachers in this study, Mia and Kristen, explained that if they thought something from Twitter might be useful in an upcoming curriculum unit they all would be teaching, they saved it for a specific time when it might be put to use by the teachers in the group. Specifically, Mia explained, “When things pop up that seem to be something that could be used in my classroom, or for other things, or whatever, I often will take the link and save it or whatever the case may be” (Mia, Interview 3, December 22, 2018). Like Mia, the teachers in this group reportedly discovered resources on Twitter by chance, highlighting the fact that teachers did not always purposely seek out the resources and information they found.

Although all the teachers in this group often turned to Twitter to seek out resources, they also acknowledged its shortcomings, including the fact that many educators did not post on Twitter regularly and that scrolling through one’s Twitter feed was often time consuming. Therefore, teachers participating in this study also turned to nondigital sources, like books, when accessing a network of resources. Based on teachers’ accounts, I inferred that these books were provided by the district or purchased by the teachers themselves for their own professional libraries. For the teachers in the study, accessing books involved a targeted and purposeful search for something in particular. The findings of this study suggested that teachers tended to turn to books when seeking a particular resource or idea that could be used in their current curriculum unit. For instance, Kristen explained that she often looked through professional texts to find resources that would help at the present point in the unit:
Regarding books . . . that I have and that I use, that’s more purposeful. That’s more thinking within the units that we’re working in and pulling out my resources there, or as I’m reading, trying to think of what teaching points I can hit with different kinds of ideas that they [the authors of the books] use or different resources or things. (Kristen, Interview 3, December 10, 2018)

In essence, the teachers in this group often relied on professional books when seeking out specific resources related to the content, skills, or unit they were teaching in that moment.

Notably, there seemed to be a common recognition among the teachers in this group that their colleagues had as much to offer as Twitter or professional texts. Therefore, these teachers also turned to their colleagues in the group when they sought out resources or wanted to know what worked for their colleagues in the context of specific lessons. The participating teachers turned to colleagues when they were looking for something that could be used more immediately rather than something that could be filed away and used later. For example, the teachers often reached out to each other to ask what others were going to teach or how they planned to teach something. In the context of this study, participants typically accessed colleagues’ help face-to-face—during a lunchtime get-together or a one-to-one conversation. Kristen explained that teachers often asked of the group during lunchtime get-togethers, “Who has a good idea for how we can [teach something in the unit]?” (Kristen, Interview 2, October 17, 2018). Among individuals, teachers would pop by each other’s classrooms and during a casual conversation ask, “How are you going to handle something [in a new unit]?” (Emma, Interview 2, November 26, 2018), “What are you doing next week for this particular thing?” (Emma, Interview 1, August 24, 2018), or “What are you doing for this?” (Kristen, Interview 1, August 27, 2018). A sense of immediacy seemed to be embedded in these conversations when teachers reached out to
individual teachers in the group. This immediacy was also evident when teachers asked their colleagues what worked for them. For the teachers in the group, this also involved an urgent or pressing issue that teachers wanted to work through with someone else. Therefore, these conversations often unfolded via phone calls, either during or outside of the school day. Sometimes teachers spoke after teaching a lesson they did not consider successful, and other times they called a colleague in the middle of the lesson. As Mia recounted a phone call with Kristen: “Those were . . . moment[s] like, ‘Please S.O.S. I need some help right now.’” (Mia, Interview 2, December 14, 2018). In referencing her S.O.S. call, Mia illustrated the urgency that drove her to call Kristen on the phone to work out a lesson that was not going the way she had intended it to go. In other words, these conversations seemed to serve as S.O.S. calls—phone calls made by teachers who needed immediate support with a particular aspect of their instruction. Mia suggested this practice was common among the teachers in the group:

If we were in the middle of a lesson, and it was going terribly . . . wrong . . . we would call in somebody else and be like, “Okay. Tell me what the heck, because this is what I did and it did not work, so what did you do?” (Mia, Interview 1, August 23, 2018)

For this group of teachers, tapping into their colleagues was key for seeking out answers to questions that felt urgent or looking for ways that content was successfully taught to students. In these ways accessing a colleague provided more timely and personalized information than turning to Twitter or professional texts.

For this group of teachers, accessing learning or ideas from previously attended formal professional development opportunities served as a way to meet their individual or common learning interests. Throughout my interviews with participants, the teachers in the group spoke about bringing ideas back from professional development offerings and then using or offering
those ideas to others in the group later. Many of the documents teachers shared with me during
the study corroborated the way the group described accessing ideas from professional
development. For instance, Mia created a collaborative Google Slides presentation that captured
ideas garnered from an in-district professional development session on word study (see Figure
4.5).

Backwards Scattergories (Meaning)

What It Is: On this day, you will individually group words from your sort into categories.
The categories are not related to what the word LOOKS like, but are related to the MEANING of the word. Then, you will meet with your partner/group. They will try to
guess your category/topic for each grouping.

Why We Do It: We do this to help us make connections between words and to continue
to grow our vocabulary.

What To Bring: Your word study folder, your words, and your notebook.

What It Looks Like:

1. Things that have to do with writing- SCRIBE
2. SCRIPT 2: Things you find outside-
SPROUT SPRUCE SQUIRREL

© Pam Koutrakos, Word Study That Sticks

Figure 4.5. Sample slide from Google Slides presentation Mia created and shared with group.

When I asked about the slides in a Google comment thread, Mia explained, “This slide
presentation is a collaborative piece that shows all the various work we have taken away from
PD [professional development]” (Mia, Google comment thread, October 12, 2018). For this
group of teachers, previously attended professional development sessions, both in and out of
district, served as a resource that was accessed by individuals or the group later. Sometimes
teachers in the group offered ideas from professional development to each other, and other times
they created a resource that they then passed on to their colleagues. As a result, teachers in this group demonstrated how they made sense of new information or approaches and tailored them to meet the group’s collective learning needs or interests.

**Considering What’s Useful to Others**

For the teachers in this group, professional learning involved more than accessing resources. A notable aspect of this group’s learning was considering what might be useful to others in the group. Because the teachers in this group were highly attuned to what their colleagues in the group were teaching, they were able to make such decisions. In this context, the group’s professional learning was not happening in a vacuum or in theory. Rather, the group knew how and what their colleagues taught and were able to consider what might be helpful to their colleagues and students when accessing, creating, or offering resources to the other teachers in the group. In a way, it seemed as though these particular teachers scrutinized, and even translated, the resources they created or found before offering them to others. Specifically, the teachers in this study spoke of thinking of “what would be most useful” for themselves and their colleagues in the group (Elise, Google comment thread, October 5, 2018), “making sure it [the resource] would be a little bit easier for people to know” (Emma, Interview 2, November 26, 2018), and considering what “was worthwhile for them [the teachers]” (Kristen, Interview 3, December 10, 2018). In this way, these teachers assumed a proactive approach to their collective learning by thinking about what might be useful and digestible to the group. This consideration was apparent in the resources the teachers created and shared with each other via Google Docs or email. For instance, in a Google Doc comment thread, Elise explained the process of creating a slide presentation to use with students or with their world religions curriculum unit—a presentation she shared with the group:
I tried to put myself in the position of the teachers who would be using this and think about what would be most helpful. I knew it needed to be straightforward enough to be understood by the students, but add some more depth for the teachers so they could feel comfortable with new information. (Elise, Google comment thread, October 5, 2018)

As demonstrated by the aforementioned example, the teachers in this group knew each other (in the context of their teaching) and their students quite well and, as a result, were able to create, access, or offer useful resources to the teachers in the group—rather than an idealized or hypothetical audience.

Because these teachers seemed to reassess regularly what might be useful to their colleagues, they often reshared documents with the group at a time when the documents might be most useful to other teachers—often during a specific unit or after a certain teacher made changes to a previously shared document. In the context of this group, teachers often reshared resources that they felt had been useful or successful in previous years. The teachers’ acts of resharing resources also unfolded during their lunchtime get-togethers. During these times, a conversation with colleagues about a current or upcoming unit usually spurred the resharing. In the following exchange, two teachers spoke about ideas for an upcoming social studies assessment:

Elise: I’m using that Google presentation that I made maybe last year, and then worked on it this summer. Has lots of links in it for . . . I didn’t put [the article] “Musty Mummies” in it, but I should. It has lots of resources in it that they could use for this.

Kristen: Did you share it with us?

Elise: I’ll share it again. (Elise, teacher-generated audio recording, December 4, 2018)
Based on the data described, the act of resharing resources was an ongoing (and time-saving) process for this group that entailed anticipating what might be useful at a particular point in the unit and making those resources readily accessible to the group.

Considering what was useful to students was another dimension of how the teachers in this group accessed a network of resources. As when the group considered what would be helpful to their colleagues, these teachers essentially considered how the resources they shared with others could be used to support students’ learning, too. In other words, teachers thought about students’ potential learning needs when creating and sharing resources with their colleagues in the group. Again, this attentiveness was evident in the documents teachers shared with me during the study. Kristen once explained via email that she emailed her colleagues a tweet containing a video that she felt could be used to support students with their understanding of historical fiction as a genre of writing and could ultimately support students with their own writing:

Because we are in the process of writing historical fiction stories and we’re studying character I think that this could be used to help teach both. When students watch a video like this I think that sometimes they’re likely to notice elements of narrative because they’re so clear. (Kristen, email correspondence, October 21, 2018)

Underlying the ways in which the teachers accessed a network of resources in this study there seemed to be a consideration of what might be useful to their colleagues and the students. In the context of this study, professional learning involved a thoughtfulness about the kind of resources teachers offered to others. Rather than arbitrarily sharing resources they accessed or found, teachers intentionally considered the usefulness of the stuff before offering it to others. In doing
so, they demonstrated a commitment to the success of both their colleagues in the group and the students in their colleagues’ classes.

**Trying Things Out**

Another notable pattern that emerged from the systematic analysis of the data was the messiness of this group of teachers trying out something new or different with a colleague or modifying something after trying it out. In other words, teachers were not simply curating resources and materials. Rather, this aspect of teachers’ professional learning entailed giving it a go in a low-stakes context and attempting to make sense of something new or different in the context of their respective classrooms. Some of the teachers specifically described their or the group’s willingness to try out new things—especially if students could potentially benefit from what they tried. In this way, professional learning extended beyond simply collecting information, resources, or knowledge and involved having a go at it as well.

Notably, trying things out was often a collective activity. Throughout our interviews, all the teachers in this study described different ways in which they tried something out with a colleague in the group. In one instance, Mia described rehearsing a lesson with two of her colleagues. In a narrative she shared with me via Google Drive, Mia explained a challenge she faced in the classroom and how she subsequently rehearsed a lesson with Kristen and Emma (see Figure 4.6).
Upon working with one of my sections, theme, character change, and understanding the “why” of what characters do posed as difficult understandings. Focusing on the lessons I had previously used to teach these ideas was not working. Feeling down in regards to how my teaching was going, I reached out to Emma and Kristen to help me get my ideas straight about how to show my students these ideas in ways that would be helpful and purposeful.

As a learner, I have always needed to see and do something in order to understand it. As I spoke with Emma first, she shared a video she had used with her students that had some complex ideas within it to teach these points. Rehearsing my lesson with her, together we were able to “lessen the load” of the video to what I felt would work with my students in a productive way.

I then met with Kristen to gather picture books and discuss how and why they would be effective in teaching these ideas. We sat and went through the texts and discussed specific language, illustrations, and pages that would create relatable and exciting opportunities for the students to learn. As a learner myself, this was the ideal situation for going back into my classroom thinking about teaching reading skills to a group that seemed to need more time for processing, active engagement, and heightened interest level.

**Figure 4.6.** Narrative about an instructional challenge, written by Mia.

For Mia, trying it out in this particular instance involved assuming the role of a student while a colleague modeled a lesson and subsequently assuming the role of a teacher as Mia rehearsed the lesson she planned to teach to her students. In one of our interviews, Mia explained that the way she rehearsed that lesson with her colleagues had been reminiscent of her experiences in a teacher preparation program in college. In other words, as a preservice teacher, she and her classmates were often afforded opportunities to play around with some of the concepts and ideas she was learning about in class and make sense of them through those experiences. Similarly, Mia admitted that this rehearsal with Kristen and Emma helped her feel more prepared when she eventually taught the lesson in the classroom. The ability to try things out with their colleagues in the group pointed to the benefit in playing around with approaches and practices—often as an attempt to work through instructional challenges with others.
Even though not all teachers in this study specifically discussed rehearsing lessons in the way Mia did, they spoke of bouncing ideas off each other or engaging in a think-aloud process with others. In this way, teachers were able to use each other as a sounding board and get their ideas straight in their minds before they used them in the classroom. Sometimes the group engaged in trying it out collectively, whereas other times an individual teacher tried things out in this manner one-on-one with another colleague. Emma explained that value, for her, in bouncing ideas off her colleagues in the group was that it “makes the learning so much easier” (Emma, Interview 1, August 24, 2018). She added:

If you have an idea and you’re not quite sure if it’s going to go over well [with your students] or if there’s maybe some steps, maybe, that I might be missing . . . it’s nice to have a conversation about it. . . . You want to get an idea. Like, “What do you think about this idea? Do you think this will work? Am I missing something?” (Emma, Interview 1, August 24, 2018)

This group of teachers often used time during the group’s face-to-face get-togethers to bounce ideas off each other and think through something coming up in a unit they taught. This process was evident in one audio recording Elise shared with me from one of the group’s get-togethers. During one exchange, Elise, Emma, and Kristen bounced ideas off each other (i.e., resources to use, structure of a particular assessment, and possible modifications) as they tried to figure out how they would use a performance assessment in one of their units. Importantly, bouncing ideas off each other did not always work in practice. For instance, teachers also reported missteps of sorts after bouncing ideas off of each other in the group. Specifically, Elise spoke of creating a tool students might use when organizing an essay after having multiple conversations during get-togethers about ways to provide more support for students who might need it. However,
while trying it out with students, Elise explained, she noticed that some students were struggling with organizing their essay. She then reconsidered what might support her students even better and ultimately revised the organizer to include color-coded parts (see Figure 4.7). These examples underscore the messiness of the ebb and flow of learning in that trying something out was not always successful on the first go.
Figure 4.7. Essay writing organizer for students, created and modified by Elise.
The trying-it-out aspect of their collective work was not always done as a group or face-to-face. Sometimes a teacher approached a colleague one-on-one via messaging in Gmail or Twitter. For Mia, one instance of trying it out involved an early-morning email to Kristen (see Figure 4.8).

Figure 4.8. Email regarding an idea from a blog sent from Mia to Kristen.

Mia shared with me a teacher-written blog she had found on Scholastic.com about tips to keep students accountable for their reading aside from using a reading log. Mia explained to me in a Google comment thread that she reached out to Kristen because she was “torn about this idea” and was “working to find the right fit for how to keep track” of students’ reading at home in an “effective, fun, and purposeful way” (Mia, email correspondence, September 21, 2018). She added, “Conferring with Kristen in this email gave me more confidence in my thinking regarding how I wanted my students to work at home and in class” (Mia, Google comment thread, October 12, 2018). In short, one-on-one messaging via Gmail or Twitter served as a useful vehicle for teachers to try things out asynchronously by clarifying their own thinking or bouncing ideas off a colleague.

Notably, the trying-it-out aspect of this group of teachers’ professional learning was not a one-shot thing. Teachers did not construct new information or discover new resources and simply accept them at face value. Over the course of the study, the participating teachers spoke
of trying something out and then subsequently modifying whatever they tried. Through interviews and artifacts that the teachers shared with me during the study, it was evident that this group of teachers did not always accept stuff as is. Rather, after trying it out, they carefully considered how stuff might be modified to better meet students’ needs or those of the group. Emma summed up this sentiment when she admitted that she took into account what she thought would gel with her classroom and teaching style when she modified something new or different she had tried out. She added, “I don’t find it [new information, resources, or learning] to be a one-size-fits-all type” (Emma, Interview 1, August 24, 2018). Given that teachers in this group understood learning to be a messy process that was not one-size-fits-all, the group seemed to normalize the process of modifying something they tried out. For this particular group, this practice seemed to be a natural part of their professional learning. Describing a mentor text organizer she tried out and shared with colleagues, Kristen indicated in a Google Docs comment thread, “I am not afraid to try new things as I see them, to see how it goes, and to modify/change/abandon if necessary” (Kristen, Google comment thread, December 5, 2018). Mia echoed this sentiment when she said, “We have to kind of be flexible in that way of, ‘Okay, this is what they suggested. I tried it, and it still flopped. What now?’” (Mia, Interview 3, December 22, 2018). Because the teachers in the group considered teaching and learning to be a messy and ongoing process, they seemed to naturally tweak, modify, or scrap things they had tried out after making sense of new experiences or information (often from students). Although teachers were certainly intentional about the modifications they made, their learning always seemed to be in process, or unfinished. From their own accounts, the teachers in this group recognized that learning could not be defined as one-size-fits-all. Therefore, they regularly used their professional experiences, understandings, and judgment to modify a thing
after trying it out. As the examples from the data set suggest, this group of teachers normalized the messy process, and practice, of trying something out and modifying it to better meet their own needs, the students’ needs, or the needs of the group.

This section shed light on the interplay between the individual and the group in terms of the group’s learning. Although I expected teachers’ collective learning to involve constructing context-specific understandings, I did not anticipate the process to be as messy and nonlinear as the findings of this study suggested. The ways in which teachers accessed a network of resources, considered what might be useful to others, and tried things out suggested that learning on the ground was not nearly as clear-cut as it is often represented to be in the current academic literature.

Discussion

This section illustrated this study’s finding concerning the messiness of this particular group of teachers’ learning in the context of their everyday work. This finding offered a more nuanced characterization of the learning the group pursued jointly—and as individuals—in this specific context. As I hypothesized, the data certainly indicated that this group of teachers collectively constructed understandings over time with an intention of bringing about change in their local context (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999b; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010). However, whereas my original conceptualization of grassroots professional learning included the idea of contextualized collaboration among a group of teachers, it failed to capture the multifaceted nature of this group’s learning. In fact, the findings of this study suggested that this group of teachers’ learning was not a neatly packaged linear process. Rather, the seeming messiness of the group’s
learning process—at least, to me as an outsider—involved an ebb and flow of accessing a network of resources, considering what might be useful to others and when, and trying stuff out.

In the case of the study at hand, the findings reported in this section suggested that the four teachers in this group were involved in an ongoing process of accessing a network of resources, which included Twitter, professional books, colleagues, and ideas garnered from previously attended professional development sessions. Although these teachers seemed to have go-to resource sources that they preferred (i.e., Kristen and Twitter), they nonetheless accessed a variety of resources depending upon what the context called for, as I will discuss in this section. In other words, the participating teachers did not adopt a one-size-fits-all-at-all-times approach to accessing resources. In seeking out specific resources and information on Twitter, in professional texts, and from their colleagues, the teachers in this study appeared to purposely seek out something they could use in a specific lesson or unit. In other words, there was a more immediate need for that specific thing they were eager to find. In this context, it seemed as though the teachers’ process of accessing a network of resources was similar to the concept of just-in-time-just-in-place learning (Brown & Duguid, 2017; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Thomas & Brown, 2011), as discussed in the academic literature on social learning theory. As described in chapter 2, just-in-time-just-in-place learning is a responsive process by which individuals seek out information they need in order to engage in a particular aspect of work.

However, purposely accessing resources was only one aspect of this group’s learning process. Throughout my interviews with participants, they offered anecdotes concerning stumbling upon resources by happenstance. For instance, teachers frequently admitted that they did not necessarily have a need for a specific resource at the time they found it, but they considered it to be something they might use later. At that point, the teachers filed the resource
away (digitally or in a physical filing cabinet) or offered it to their colleagues with a disclaimer that this newfound resource might be something the group considers or uses later in the school year. Based on my findings, I would argue that scholars have oversimplified the conceptualization of just-in-time-just-in-place learning by suggesting that learning is less effective if individuals do not have an immediate need for the information. Embedded in their conceptualization is the idea that learning is a linear process by which an individual seeks out something particular that they need to do a particular thing in a particular way at a particular time. For this group of teachers, just-in-time-just-in-place learning was not something that was always (and neatly) reserved for a specific and immediate need, unit, or lesson. Rather, the group in this study seemed to think more broadly about their instructional practices and to anticipate potential needs when accessing resources. In turn, this broader thinking contributed to the messiness of this process—accessing resources without always having a clear purpose or intention. Although there was not always an immediate need to alter their instruction or use a different resource, the teachers demonstrated an open-mindedness about learning that was evident in the different ways they accessed resources. This receptiveness was apparent, for instance, when the teachers in this group scrolled through their Twitter feeds and stumbled across something that they essentially bookmarked for a lesson or unit they would be teaching later in the school year. In this study, it seemed that teachers’ just-in-time-just-in-place learning involved more than simply attending immediately to a specific need. It also involved keeping an eye out for resources and information that might be banked and put to use over the course of the year.

That being said, and as discussed above, at times participating teachers did seek out information or resources when they were needed. Based on this finding, it seemed unmistakable
that teachers’ process of accessing a network of resources also involved pulling (Brown & Adler, 2008) information on an as-needed basis. In their work, Hagel and Brown (2008) explained that pull models of learning support individuals in locating appropriate resources that are of direct use, unlike push models, which externally prescribe specific resources and designate how that information should or might be used. However, it must be said that the teachers in this study did not avoid using information that was pushed to them, either. Rather, they pulled from this information and made it meaningful for their teaching contexts and for the group. In other words, teachers reinterpreted new information and understandings gained from formal, push-model workshops to fit their local context. For instance, Mia created (and invited others to collaborate on) Google Slides comprising her instructional takeaways from an in-district workshop on word study. Although information at professional development sessions, like the aforementioned workshop, was often pushed to these teachers, this group found ways to pull relevant pieces from those experiences and bring them back to the group. Simply, teachers in this study used information that was pushed to them, quite naturally, to pull those resources that would be useful in their day-to-day teaching. In the context of this study, it seemed pushing information to this group of teachers served as a springboard for them to pull from it in meaningful ways that supported their day-to-day instruction.

Throughout the data, it was evident that this group of teachers considered what would be useful to others when engaging in the messy process of learning. When the participating teachers spoke of creating or offering resources to others in the group, they frequently acknowledged thinking about their colleagues or their students when doing so. Thus, the findings suggested that the teachers in this group enacted truly social learning by attending to the needs of both their colleagues and students and by looking to the future in terms of
instruction. For instance, Emma and Elise both talked about creating documents in Google Drive in a way that would be easy for their colleagues to understand and use in their classrooms. Throughout my conversations with this group, the teachers offered anecdotes that pointed to this attentiveness being embedded in their learning process. In this context, these teachers seemed to be practicing agency in regard to the ways in which they considered what would be useful for others when accessing a network of resources. For the purposes of my discussion of the study’s findings, I use the term *agency* to refer to “being able to participate (not just spectate) and produce (not just consume) in ways that matter positively for one’s self, others, and our shared world” (Gee, 2017, p. 17). In this view, agency is not something that teachers either have or do not have. Instead, it refers to being able to act and create in ways that are of importance to an individual and to others. I argue that viewing teachers as proactive agents shifts the focus to teachers acting in agentic ways rather than simply having (or not having) agency. In the context of this study, this group’s active and responsive process of accessing resources suggested the teachers were acting with agency when they considered what would be relevant at the present time and in the future to the group.

Although previous scholarship has examined the role of social relationships in teachers’ expressions of agency (e.g., Coburn & Russell, 2008; Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2013; Ryder, Lidar, Lundqvist, & Östman, 2018), many of these studies have focused on the impact of social relationships on teachers’ enactment of agency in the context of policy reforms. For example, in their study of Swedish science teachers’ responses to national reforms, Ryder and colleagues (2018) found that teachers’ “productive collaboration” (p. 553) while constructing approaches for scoring national tests strengthened their agency as they executed said reforms. Although the literature seemed to offer insights into the role teachers’ social relationships played...
in the context of their professional learning, the data in the study at hand illustrated these relationships were embedded in teachers’ everyday enactments of agency. For example, when Elise created a unit overview in Google Slides for her colleagues, she intentionally tried to consider her colleagues’ understandings of the content of the unit. Unlike the findings of studies on agency in the context of school reforms, I would argue that teachers’ social relationships did not merely support or enhance the professional learning in which they engaged with their colleagues. Rather, the social relationships were at the forefront of teachers’ thinking when they were considering what was useful to others. In this way, this group of teachers’ social relationships directly shaped how these four teachers enacted agency in their day-to-day practices of creating and offering resources to others.

Another finding in this study indicated that teachers in this group actively tried out something new or different—especially in relation to working with someone else. What was notable about this finding is that trying it out was something the entire group engaged in as they pursued their collective professional learning. It was an organic aspect of how this group approached their learning. Sometimes the teachers in this study spoke of trying things out with a colleague (e.g., a lesson, resources to use, performance assessments). Other times they recalled trying out something new in their classrooms on their own. This trying-things-out aspect of this group of teachers’ professional learning seemed to represent a tinkering of sorts—a hands-on way to make sense of something new or different by playing around and actually giving it a go. After teachers tried something out, they often modified it before using it again in their classrooms. In this way, teachers’ professional learning was not always a linear process, because it often involved accessing a resource, considering whether it was worth using, trying it out in some capacity, tweaking it, using it in their classrooms, and then often tweaking some more.
This finding suggested that this group’s professional learning entailed more than just acquiring learning about literacy instruction and practices. Trying stuff out in their classrooms and reporting back to a supportive group was an integral part of their collective professional learning, which I argue is also a form of agency. In the current times of teacher evaluations and accountability, successful or effective teaching tends to be at the forefront of media and policy accounts (cf. Cohen, Spillane, & Peurach, 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2016; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Shakman et al., 2016). Yet this group of teachers chose to take risks with their teaching because they knew it would matter for the students in their classes. For instance, Mia tried out various ways—including the use of digital libraries—of helping a group of students feel more engaged and excited about the books they were reading in school. Based on Mia’s reporting of this account, it seemed clear that her decision to try stuff out was driven by her desire to support her students—not a preoccupation with being an effective teacher.

For this group of teachers, trying things out on their own and with others seemed to be one of the authentic practices that defined their particular group (see commentaries on the importance of this for learning in Brown & Adler, 2008; Brown et al., 1989; Brown & Duguid, 2017; Knobel & Kalman, 2016; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Thomas & Brown, 2011). For example, get-togethers were a prime opportunity for this group of teachers to try out ideas with each other. Therefore, in this study, learning to be a literacy teacher in the context of this group necessarily involved an open-mindedness when it came to trying things out (see also Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Knobel & Kalman, 2016). Because learning to be a member of a community is not about transferring knowledge, learning may look and be different from person to person, as it was in this study (Gee, 2017; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Thomas & Brown, 2011). Although the existing academic literature usefully provided a description of learning to be a participant in a
community, it also seemed to suggest that there was an endpoint or a finality to it. For instance, Brown and Adler (2008) referenced a learner becoming “a full participant in the field” (p. 19). I argue that the teachers participating in the study were already, in fact, full participants in the field as evidenced by their ongoing engagement in their collective professional learning. For this group of teachers, learning was not restricted to learning to be a full participant. Instead, their ongoing process of learning demonstrated their commitment to continuing to be teachers who tried things out for the benefit of their students. For instance, teachers recognized that learning was not a one-size-fits-all process and spoke of their willingness to continue to try things out and adapt them for their particular teaching contexts. In one case, Kristen discussed how she felt comfortable trying out a Google spreadsheet she created to support the writers in her class and then modifying (or abandoning) it as needed. This study’s finding pointed to this group of teachers’ ongoing willingness to try things out for the good of their students and challenged the idea that learning to be a participant in a collective is a singular, and ultimate, achievement for a group of learners.

**Conclusion of This Section on Getting Messy With Our Learning**

The findings in this section challenge contemporary assumptions associated with social learning in a number of ways, by critiquing the oversimplification of just-in-time-just-in-place learning, comparing the usefulness of pull and push approaches to learning, and exploring what exactly it means to learn to be a humanities teacher in a group. These findings point to the richness and messiness of the learning process in which this group of teachers engaged as they pursued their professional learning and directly challenged conceptualizations of teachers’ professional learning as process with a fixed end. In the case of this study, those conceptualizations shortchange the messy, ongoing learning embedded in teachers’ everyday
work as evidenced by the ways in which the group accessed a network of resources, considered what might be useful to others, and tried things out in the context of their professional learning. Therefore, the findings of this study strongly suggest that it is more useful to conceptualize professional learning in a way that captures the uniqueness of the process as well as of the teachers themselves. Having discussed the interplay between the individual teachers and the group, I now turn to how teachers negotiated their learning in the context of institutional structures and processes.

**Being Savvy About Institutional Structures and Processes**

In the earlier sections of this chapter, I described the relational aspect of this group of teachers’ professional learning, the group dynamics that were in play while they engaged in their collective learning, and the interplay between the individual teachers and the group. In this section, I analyze and discuss the ways in which this group of teachers were savvy about institutional structures and processes. For the purposes of this research report, the term *institutional structures* describes the organization norms and management decisions in an education system, and *institutional processes* describes how said decisions are made in an organization. Institutional structures, for example, might include class schedules, district policies, school rules, administrator expectations, or physical classroom allocation, and institutional processes might include the actions taken by administrators when executing those decisions. Although I initially hypothesized in this study that grassroots professional learning involved teachers attempting to dismantle institutional structures and processes, this study’s findings seemed to suggest that this group of teachers actually used these structures and processes in savvy ways to maximize their own learning by leveraging opportunities, finding work-arounds, and checking the boxes. These moves can be construed readily as a kind of
savviness about institutional structures because these teachers constructed actions, embedded in their everyday practices, that they used to help maximize their learning within—and even because of—these structures. I discuss each of these in the context of teachers’ professional learning in detail below.

**Leveraging Opportunities**

Much of the current academic literature dismisses top-down formal professional development and draws a distinction between professional development and professional learning (as discussed in Knobel & Kalman, 2016). In this view, formal professional development is typically negative, useless, or ineffective. Notably, the findings of this study suggested that school leaders need not choose to advocate *either* professional learning *or* top-down professional development, as I assumed at the outset of this study. In fact, professional learning for this group of teachers was not completely do-it-yourself. Rather, a common thread that emerged from my analysis of the data was the way in which this group of teachers leveraged formal and informal professional learning opportunities alike. That is, teachers made the most of available experiences that might support their own and the group’s learning. These opportunities included attending formal professional development offerings, working on curriculum or district initiatives during the summer, facilitating in-district professional development sessions, and participating in projects with consultants and staff developers.

Though not required to attend out-of-district professional development opportunities, this group of teachers variously sought out and took advantage of available formal learning offerings. Typically, the teachers in this group pursued formal professional development opportunities that related directly to district initiatives or the content they taught. The teachers found these opportunities valuable in that they broadened the teachers’ understanding of literacy
instruction practices. With approval and funding from the district, teachers reported attending multiday summer institutes hosted by a local district as well as multiday institutes and one-day Saturday reunions hosted throughout the year by Teachers College, a graduate school of education at Columbia University in New York City. Often, teachers in this group selected the sessions they would attend together based on what seemed useful or interesting or what was related to a professional book they had read. Participating in these formal professional development sessions afforded these teachers the opportunity to learn different ways to teach literacy. For instance, Emma described learning how to teach students to study pictures from a session she attended with Kristen and Elise. Emma emphasized how this newfound instructional technique would be useful in her teaching. She explained studying pictures would be “a great opener for any type of lesson that you’re going to learn because, one, you get the kids really thinking, then you learn what they know” (Emma, Interview 1, August 24, 2018). For this group of teachers, participation in these formal professional development sessions brought into view new ways of teaching literacy that they were eager to try out in their classrooms.

Since not all the teachers in this study attended the same formal professional development opportunities, they understood their personal obligation to be turnkeys, or teachers who gathered information, understanding, and resources during professional development sessions and then passed on that information to their colleagues later. The teachers in this study acknowledged that the practice of turnkeying information and resources was a priority, and well received, among the group. In discussing her commitment to keep others informed about her experiences at professional development opportunities, Elise admitted, “I’m going to share with the others [in the group] what happens, what I learn, what resources, and ideas of how we could implement it” (Elise, Interview 1, August 20, 2018). For Emma, the group’s practice of being
turnkey teachers benefited her as a learner. She discussed feeling as though she was “a better teacher” after learning from her colleagues’ experiences and described this opportunity as a less formal way of “continuing your education” (Emma, Interview 2, November 26, 2018). As turnkeys, individual teachers made sure the rest of the group had a chance to learn from their attendance at formal professional development sessions.

Working on curriculum and district initiatives during the summer were just two examples of in-district learning opportunities of which the teachers availed themselves. Through the opportunity to develop and revise district curriculum and related initiatives during summers, this group of teachers reported developing a deeper understanding of the curriculum itself. In speaking of this work, Elise said that she felt she learned a lot simply from “getting up to your elbows in it [the curriculum]” (Elise, Interview 2, October 28, 2018). Mia had a slightly different take on this learning experience. For her, it provided a space for everyone participating to contribute and express their thinking. She offered this thought: “So I think it’s a very healthy way in which we’re given the opportunity to work together [during these experiences]. . . . Everybody feels comfortable in the fact that they could be heard” (Mia, Interview 1, August 23, 2018). Teachers reported that typically, a supervisor or administrator asked for volunteers to develop or revise district curriculum or resources related to district initiatives. The teachers in this group recounted the summers when they spent time developing or rewriting things like “the profile project” for grade 5 students (Kristen, Interview 2, October 17, 2018; Mia, Interview 1, August 23, 2018) or a social studies unit about India and China (Emma, Interview 1, August 24, 2018). Although this summer work was certainly not required of the teachers, they leveraged it as an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the curriculum, an understanding that they in turn contributed to the group’s professional learning.
Another way this group of teachers leveraged learning opportunities was through facilitating learning sessions for colleagues beyond their group. For these teachers, facilitating professional learning afforded them an opportunity that was different from their day-to-day work with students. As Mia described, “It’s far different to get up in front of a group of adults, who may or may not want to be sitting there listening to you” (Mia, Interview 1, August 23, 2018). The teachers in this group spoke of leading “a workshop on Twitter,” (Kristen, Interview 1, August 27, 2018), providing an interactive overview of the Teachers College Summer Writing Institute at the “year-beginning Ed Camp” (Kristen, Interview 1, August 27, 2018), and ways to use “video aloud or storytelling” (Elise, Interview 1, August 20, 2018) from the Teachers College Social Studies Institute. These teachers facilitated these workshops for teachers outside their group after being asked to do so by administrators or just because they decided to offer them to others. Unlike formal professional development opportunities, these sessions tended to be more personal and relatable for the teachers in this group given the teachers’ awareness of their local teaching context. In this way, these opportunities provided a different kind of value than formal professional development, as Mia explained:

I think it’s nice to hear it from a colleague sometimes, who’s in the thick of it with you, than [sic] sometimes having a presenter come in and you know that’s what he or she is doing all day long, every day. And you know they . . . I just feel like hearing it from your colleague who knows what you’re going through is sometimes more understandable and worthwhile. (Mia, Interview 2, December 14, 2018)

By leveraging an opportunity to facilitate in-house professional development for colleagues, Mia demonstrated professional and personal value in sharing her understandings and knowledge with her colleagues.
For this group of teachers, leveraging learning opportunities also included volunteering to participate in projects with other professionals and educators within and outside their school district. These opportunities provided the group of teachers with a way not only to enhance their understanding of instructional practices for teaching literacy but also to extend their reach beyond the immediate group with whom they engaged in professional learning. Kristen recounted participating with a few colleagues in a project involving one of the district’s administrators, literacy consultants, and the use of Swivl cameras to record and analyze one’s teaching. She also spoke of volunteering for a literary essay project with Katie Clements (a Columbia University Teachers College staff developer) and a group of teachers. She explained that she came to participate in this project after working in a small group with Clements during the Teachers College Summer Writing Institute. Kristen took advantage of this opportunity to connect with other educators across the country and ultimately co-develop a bank of literary essays that could be used to support writing instruction. This example pointed to how Kristen leveraged opportunities for professional learning that allowed her to connect with others and grow her own understandings of literacy instruction and approaches.

In sum, the group of teachers participating in this study really seemed to leverage professional learning opportunities to their own benefit—and to the benefit of their colleagues. It was evident that although these learning opportunities represented a mix of formal and informal happenings, these offerings and opportunities to facilitate workshops piqued teachers’ professional curiosities and offered possibilities for expanding the group’s knowledge of literacy teaching.
Finding Work-Arounds

For this group of teachers engaged in their own collective professional learning, being savvy about institutional structures also involved an awareness of constraints that might hinder the collective learning work in which they engaged. To overcome those constraints, they sought work-arounds. In this study, teachers typically encountered institutional constraints related to what they considered to be a lack of adequate time to pursue learning in a way they wanted. Notably, this group did not allow these constraints to determine if they would pursue their learning with the group. Rather, they sought out creative work-arounds that helped them move past the constraints they often faced and continue to engage in professional learning with meaning and purpose. These work-arounds, which I describe in detail in this section, involved making things accessible for others in the group and maximizing any available time.

Unsurprisingly, the teachers in this group frequently referenced a common constraint that they faced—inadequate time to pursue their learning in a way that was useful for individual teachers and for the group. In absence of common planning or preparation periods, the group relied heavily on their get-togethers to engage in face-to-face professional learning. However, the teachers in this group all spoke of the challenges of trying to accomplish all they set out to during their lunchtime meetings. In regard to their get-togethers, the group talked about “watching the clock” (Elise, Interview 2, October 28, 2018), being aware of the “time crunch” (Emma, Interview 2, November 26, 2018), and feeling as though time was “eaten up sometimes by things” they had to complete (Kristen, Interview 2, October 17, 2018). Having moved grades, Mia faced a slightly different time-related constraint—not having the same lunchtime or preparation period as her colleagues. During a conversation, Mia spoke of the challenges this posed for her:
We have different lunchtime periods or we have different prep periods. So I would very often just walk up the stairs and just peek in and see if it was an okay time for me to ask a question, or have that five-minute conversation. Certainly not having a 45-minute conversation that I would love to have, and vice versa, too. . . . You’re trying to . . . think about when those conversations can happen and when that kind of communication can make it work. (Mia, Interview 2, December 14, 2018)

These examples, and many more from the data set, indicated that constraints related to school schedules challenged the group in terms of how they engaged in professional learning together.

As this group of teachers engaged in professional learning, they regularly encountered time-related constraints that impacted how they engaged in their collective professional learning. Although these constraints did not lead the group to give up on their learning, the teachers certainly felt a tension between what they wanted to do and what they had time to do. At times, teachers’ professional learning unfolded differently because of these time-related constraints. For instance, Kristen admitted feeling as though the group could not be creative with their work during their lunchtime get-togethers because they had to focus on whatever they felt needed to be accomplished. Similarly, Elise described how time during lunchtime meetings was typically spent talking about something as a group and how the teachers would then create related resources on their own time (e.g., rubrics that corresponded with content being taught). Given the crunch for time, the group did not have the luxury of spending time to create resources together during lunchtime meetings. Elise bluntly explained, “Well, the reason that doesn’t happen is because there’s not enough time during lunchtime for that to happen” (Elise, Interview 2, October 28, 2018). For this group of teachers, time-related constraints, mainly related to teachers’ schedules, challenged them as they engaged in professional
learning. Although the teachers often responded to the tension they felt as a result of the limited time they had together, they also found creative work-arounds to navigate these constraints.

One such work-around pertained to how teachers made stuff accessible and time saving for others in their group. Technology, including email and G Suite for Education (a set of cloud-based Google tools, which includes various apps for word processing, email, spreadsheets, etc.), played a significant role in these teachers’ efforts to do so. Because, as I discussed earlier, these teachers felt as though they did not have adequate time to always engage in sustained conversations with each other about literacy instruction, they often used email and Google apps to make ideas and resources available to everyone in the group. As evidenced in the data I collected via conversations and Google comment threads in teacher-shared documents, this group of teachers described the conversations with colleagues that drove them to make specific resources accessible to others. For this group of teachers, conversations they had either one-on-one or as a group often spurred these efforts to make things accessible to each other. Teachers described separate instances of emailing a tweet after having conversations about “having kids write at the end of a reading period” (Kristen, teacher-generated email to other teachers, October 23, 2018) and of emailing an Edutopia link after talking about how to infuse “the digital world” in reading workshop (Mia, Interview 3, December 22, 2018). In these cases, technology served as a way for teachers to continue these conversations asynchronously when feeling short on time to talk face-to-face. Notably, since these documents and resources were tied to recent conversations teachers had with each other, the resources were relevant and timely in the context of what teachers were currently teaching. During one get-together, Emma briefly overviewed the new understandings about writing she had gleaned from attending an institute at Teachers
College. Having had a prior conversation with Emma about the session, Elise responded during the meeting by describing a resource she created and shared with the group:

“You said yesterday . . . they [staff developers at Teachers College] seem to really emphasize structure and elaboration [in students’ writing]. So I created that one thing I shared with you guys about how my kids are working through it.” (Elise, teacher-generated audio recording, December 4, 2018)

In this study, online digital spaces and multiuser affordances certainly seemed to serve as a crucial aspect of these teachers’ professional learning. Although time-related constraints could have hindered teachers’ professional learning, the teachers in this study responded by making things accessible to the group as a way to counteract those challenges and continue conversations about literacy instructional practices and approaches asynchronously.

Aside from using G Suite for Education, all the teachers in this group also used email to make resources available to their colleagues and have conversations about said resources. Often email was used to recap understandings of a resource or document mentioned during lunchtime get-togethers. Because time was of an essence to this group of teachers, email indirectly served as a way to save time, because teachers did not have to seek out a colleague to ask about a specific document or resource. For these teachers, it was often easier to send an email (with an attachment as necessary) to colleagues in the group than to seek out and find someone at a time that was convenient for both teachers. Aside from the efficiency and usefulness of using email to make resources available, email also, quite surprisingly, provided a space for thoughtful inquiries and responses. Mia explained, “I was able to think out what I wanted to say or ask . . . and then my colleagues were able to have that same time to kind of think independently, before responding or before collaborating, or adding [to the resource]” (Mia, Interview 2, December 14,
2018). In addition to making documents and resources accessible to the group, the use of email afforded the teachers an opportunity to thoughtfully consider the content of the email before responding to it.

Although G Suite for Education was a critical tool for making resources and documents accessible to the group, another common work-around for overcoming the constraints these teachers faced was making stuff user-friendly for their colleagues. This work-around typically included teachers making Google Docs, Google Slides, and notes from professional development sessions easy to understand and apply in one’s own teaching context. Recognizing that time for extended conversations was often limited by structural constraints, the teachers in this group anticipated what their colleagues might need in the document or resource in order to make sense of it or use it independently in their classrooms. Therefore, this user-friendly stuff also seemed to have a self-service aspect to it. In other words, this group of teachers strove to make resources and documents as usable as possible when their colleagues accessed something or tried to put it to use on their own. To make these resources user-friendly and organized, Elise embedded links to things like a “video aloud,” “storytelling,” or “a Brain Pop video” in Google Slides (Elise, Interview 2, October 28, 2018). In another instance, Emma embedded a video link and images in her notes from a professional development session at Teachers College (see Figure 4.9).
The teachers in this group shared an understanding that these documents and resources alone might be overwhelming (due to the sheer volume of content they included) or unfamiliar to someone who did not attend the formal professional development. As a result, professional learning in this study entailed a mindfulness around making information as usable and useful as possible for colleagues. Additionally, various examples in the data suggested that the teachers in the group did, in fact, access and use some of the documents and resources shared with them.
As indicated by these examples, time-related constraints, which often hindered the teachers from conversing or otherwise working together in person, seemed to motivate them to create and share user-friendly documents and resources in the group.

Although teachers relied heavily on technology to navigate time-related constraints, they also found time outside of the school day to have conversations about their practice, understandings, and questions. Sometimes these conversations unfolded before or after school. Quite regularly they involved emails or phone calls to colleagues that were made outside of school hours and school walls. Simply, teachers’ professional learning was not confined to the school day. Interestingly, however, the teachers in this study recognized that this was not always the ideal way to talk with each other. During our second conversation, Mia explained what made trying to talk with her colleagues on their own time challenging:

> It took a lot more planning on my end, and I think it took a lot more willingness on my colleagues’ end to take their time out, too, because now it’s their extra time that they’re trying to do what they need to do for their own classrooms. (Mia, Interview 2, December 14, 2018)

Although the data suggested that this group of teachers appeared willing to make the time to talk with their colleagues in the group outside the school day, they also recognized that in doing so they were infringing on what they considered to be others’ valuable personal time.

Given that talking outside of the school day was not always a viable option, maximizing time during lunchtime meetings was essential to this group of teachers’ professional learning. Over time, the group found ways to use the time during lunchtime get-togethers more purposefully. For instance, teachers described collectively determining a focus for their lunchtime meetings prior to getting together. This focus was intended to help the group remain
on track and maximize their limited time. Often they focused on a common or shared need identified by the group. Elise indicated this focus “was a need-based one—‘We tried something, and it flopped’—or based on the need from a special ed. Perspective” (Elise, Interview 2, October 28, 2018). As another way to maximize their time during lunchtime get-togethers, some of the teachers in the group had self-designated responsibilities. For instance, Mia (when she taught fifth grade) assumed responsibility for note-taking, and Emma located and displayed digital resources on the SMART Board. In maximizing the time they had during get-togethers, this group of teachers demonstrated a commitment to their collective learning despite the limitations on their shared time.

Coupled with an awareness of how time constraints shaped their professional learning, the teachers in this group took advantage of moments when they could have informal conversations with each other. These conversations often unfolded in the hallways or stairwells as teachers were passing by each other. During these brief conversations, teachers seemed to discuss something related to a unit they were teaching at the time or to talk about resources that might be useful for teaching a specific lesson. In these instances, the conversational focus was grounded in immediacy. Teachers reported speaking in the hallway about a specific lesson they were teaching that day, handing out hard copies of a resource they might use for a lesson, or asking a fellow teacher what she had been doing instructionally in the classroom. Elise even captured these hallway conversations in the image she created to explain the dynamics in the group (see Figure 4.10). In essence, time-related constraints seemed to prompt these informal, and brief, exchanges about literacy instruction.
The hallways and stairways were not the only places for informal conversations among the teachers in this group. These teachers frequently stopped by each other’s classrooms, during a teacher’s preparation period or even instructional time, and had quick conversations with each other. Similar to the conversations in the hallway, these brief chats were context specific and time dependent. In other words, teachers popped by each other’s classrooms to seek out information about something they were teaching or would be teaching soon. Teachers also spoke of visiting a colleague’s classroom to “just to see what’s happening” (Emma, Interview 2, November 26, 2018), to ask, “What are you guys doing now? Where are you [in the unit]?” (Kristen, Interview 3, December 10, 2018), or to “ask a question, or have that five-minute conversation” (Mia, Interview 2, December 14, 2018). Notably, some of the teachers in this
group spoke of how a former administrator had initially facilitated interclassroom visitations and had arranged for coverage for teachers. Although the formal classroom visitations began (and ended) with their former principal, informal visits to each other’s classrooms provided pivotal opportunities for the group to swap resources and strategies.

As mentioned above, many of these informal visits took place during a teacher’s preparation period (prep). During these times, teachers reported popping by a colleague’s classroom to look at the teacher-created charts, ask questions about how the colleague was going to teach a lesson, ask for the colleague’s opinion on how the questioner planned to teach a lesson, or simply ask for help. In recalling a time that Emma popped into her classroom during her prep to observe her instruction, Kristen spoke of the value of the classroom visitations for her:

Sometimes, on our prep, there’s a million other things going on, but I do think that’s a good thing to do because you can think you know what’s going on in someone else’s class, but you really don’t. They have all sorts of different kinds of great ideas. And I think to be sitting in the back of the classroom is pretty valuable. (Kristen, Interview 2, October 17, 2018)

Undoubtedly, time-related constraints could have dictated whether or not the group continued to pursue their collective professional learning. However, because this group of teachers saw the value in the learning in which they engaged, they found work-arounds that helped them navigate these constraints.

**Checking the Boxes**

Although doing what was expected or required by administrators might seem to contradict the idea of professional learning as it is conceptualized in this study, this group of
teachers demonstrated a savviness about institutional structures and processes in doing so. Certainly, the teachers in this group recognized the aforementioned expectations and, at times, put those expectations before their own professional learning interests. For instance, these teachers all spoke about making sure they were “staying on track, on the pace with the curriculum map” (Emma, Interview 2, November 26, 2018), staying “on track with the next step” (Elise, Interview 2, October 28, 2018), making sure they were on “the same page” (Kristen, Interview 1, August 27, 2018), and trying to make the teaching points in a given unit “work for everybody” (Mia, Interview 1, August 23, 2018). In so doing, this group of teachers was keenly aware of the expectations in place for their instruction and adhered to those expectations as they engaged in their collective professional learning.

Importantly, adhering to these expectations was more about a usefulness to the group than it was about compliance. In the following example, Elise acknowledged how the habit of making sure the group remained on track was useful in the context of their professional learning:

We do it because we find it helpful. It’s almost like a check-in: “Where are you guys on the unit? Where are you guys in the unit? When [are] you doing the postassessment?” That kind of stuff is really helpful. It’s accountability. We find it helpful to keep ourselves on the track. (Elise, Interview 2, October 28, 2018)

This group of teachers’ awareness of the administration’s expectations also filtered into the stuff they created and used in their classrooms. For instance, teachers recalled the district’s stated efforts to encourage teachers to integrate reading, writing, and social studies instruction and how the group took that into account when creating or searching for resources. More specifically, Elise outlined some questions she asked herself when creating a self-assessment for students:
I think in terms of what I’ve been asked to do from the administration. What things need to happen? Then how can I make that happen? What is this going to look like to the child, to the student? What’s this going to look like to the parent who receives it? What’s going to help all of them understand as much as they can about the self-assessment, and my feedback, and the kids’ growth? (Elise, Interview 3, December 8, 2018)

Checking the boxes was an integral aspect of this group of teachers’ professional learning. For these teachers, an awareness of the administration’s expectations permeated their conversations during get-togethers and in the stuff they created. However, teachers applied these expectations in a way that was useful to the group’s professional learning.

For this group of teachers, being savvy about institutional structures involved making themselves seen. Although it might seem more likely that teachers would attempt to circumvent administrative expectations and directives (cf. findings in Jusinski, 2018b, for example), the teachers in this study revealed a proactive effort to keep their administrator informed of and involved in their professional learning. When a new administrator began working at Brooks, the group of teachers wanted to make sure she knew who they were as a group. This effort involved proactively inviting the new principal to the group’s lunchtime get-togethers and sharing a Google Drive folder containing notes from their get-togethers. Although the lunchtime get-togethers were not required by their administrator or the district, the group still chose to make themselves and their professional learning seen when they reached out to their administrator about the challenge of finding a time to meet as a group. Mia explained, “We were trying to keep her in the loop of how we operated, and what that looked like, and that kind of thing” (Mia, Interview 1, August 23, 2018). I argue that, as this example showed, the group took it upon themselves to assert who they were in the context of their collective professional learning as a
means of preserving their collective professional learning when a new principal began working in their school. In sum, the findings of this study suggested that professional learning for this group of teachers involved being savvy about institutional structures. Although I initially anticipated that the teachers would try to evade these structures as they pursued their own learning, the results suggested that teachers actually used these structures in ways that helped them to maximize their professional learning. By leveraging opportunities, finding work-arounds, and checking the boxes, these teachers, I argue, were able to navigate institutional structures that all too often are seen by teachers and academics alike as negatively constraining, and thus they were able to continue pursuing their professional learning in ways that were meaningful for the group.

Discussion

This section focuses on this study’s finding concerning the ways in which the group of teachers was savvy about institutional structures and processes. This theme highlighted how the teachers in this study navigated their own professional learning in relation to the larger systems and institutions. Although the data indicated that teachers in this study demonstrated agency through their choices, as a way to make an impact in their educational contexts (cf. Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2013; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a; Gourd, 2015; Pyhältö et al., 2012; Wallen & Tormey, 2019), they did so within the constraints of institutional structures. Thus, the findings presented a much more complex picture of this group of teachers’ agency when examined in this specific context. Agents, as defined by sociologists, are people who are able to make things happen through action (Cole, 2019). Given this, it is useful at this point to make a distinction between big $A$ Agency and little $a$ agency. To signal the difference between these two ends of the agency continuum, I differentiate between big $A$ Agency and little $a$ agency in
the following way. Big $A$ Agency refers to the dismantling of the larger systems or institutions in place, whereas little $a$ agency means working within those systems. Precedent for differentiating between scales of a phenomenon in this way is well established. Gee (2008), for example, uses the terms big “D” Discourse and little “d” discourse to differentiate between practices and language adopted by particular groups of people and specific ways of using of language within those practices. Similarly, Plein (2018) used big “C” Collective and little “c” collective to make a distinction between macro and micro views of what constitutes a collective in the context of digital technologies (i.e., Big “C” Collective describes the know-how, experiences, and understandings that teachers brought and constructed in a #sschat affinity space, and little “c” collective describes the digital tools that supported teachers’ interactions in that space). The work of scholars like Gee and Plein are particularly useful in my discussion of how the teachers in this study demonstrated savviness about institutional structures and processes, because these scholars help me differentiate between little $a$ and big $A$ a/Agency. The teachers who participated in this study were not attempting to overthrow or dismantle the systems or processes in place (big $A$ Agency), as I initially hypothesized they might. Rather, they navigated (and negotiated) within those very systems and institutions (little $a$ agency), as evidenced by the ways this group leveraged opportunities, found work-arounds, and checked the boxes. Often the literature appears to set big $A$ Agency as a key goal for all teachers (cf. Baker-Doyle & Gustavson, 2016; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999a; Pyhältö et al., 2012). This is certainly an important ongoing goal, but it risks overlooking or minimizing smaller scale instances where teachers—like the ones I studied—find ways to work in the gaps between the places of the powerful (e.g., administration, scheduling, curriculum policies and requirements) to bring about important changes or growth in their own work as teachers and within their classrooms (cf. the
account in de Certeau, 1984, of everyday agency and institutional power). This group of teachers demonstrated little agency when they made the most out of the institutional structures and expectations that were in place in a way that on the surface may appear to be mundane or even acquiescent. And yet the data strongly suggested that these teachers were not simply doing what was asked or expected of them. They did not refer to rules and regulations as the sole drivers for their decision making. Rather than trying to buck the system overtly, they made space for their learning within the institutional structures that were already defined and in place (cf. de Certeau, 1984). For example, and presented in more detail earlier, teachers in this study leveraged email and Google apps to make resources available and accessible to everyone in the group. As a result of this group’s savviness, I argue, they were able to engage in deep professional learning on their own terms, within the instructional structures and with each other, in a way that was particularly useful to them and their students. This also suggests to me, in keeping with researchers of the everyday, like Michel de Certeau, that differentiating between scales of agency may prove useful to education scholars by highlighting the complexities of a/Agency and how instances of little agency can, in fact, lead to growth in teachers’ everyday work with students and in schools.

A finding in this study illustrated that this group of teachers leveraged formal and informal opportunities for professional learning within and outside the district. These results highlighted the fact that professional learning did not entail a complete avoidance of formal professional learning offerings. Rather, in this context, professional learning involved teachers making the most of any available opportunities that might expand their understanding of ways to teach literacy. These opportunities not only supported this group of teachers’ own learning but also helped foster their colleagues’ professional learning. In this way, this particular group of
teachers seemed to view themselves as active agents of change rather than “objects of reforms” (Pyhältö et al., 2012, p. 110).

For Pyhältö and colleagues, these concepts represented two distinct views that teachers can hold. Specifically, teachers who view themselves as active agents consider their actions to matter in their school context, whereas teachers who think of themselves as objects of reforms consider their actions to be dictated by external sources. In their study of teacher agency in the context of school reform in Finland, Pyhältö and colleagues (2012) noted that a majority of participating teachers did not consider themselves as having agency with regard to school reforms because they did not see the significance of said reforms in their day-to-day classroom experiences. Although the context of my study did not specifically involve school reform, the study is couched within the professional development context of being a teacher, and the teachers in this study were engaged in their own professional learning during which a number of district initiatives were launched, including departmentalization. Therefore, although the findings of scholars (e.g., Baker-Doyle & Gustavson, 2016; Pyhältö et al., 2012; Wallen & Tormey, 2019) pointed to relationships, conditions, and structures that might impact teachers’ professional agency, my findings suggested that the district initiatives did not frustrate this group of teachers’ professional learning. Rather, I would argue, the institutional structures helped to facilitate the professional learning in which this particular group of teachers engaged collectively. For instance, teachers in this study regularly, and voluntarily, attended out-of-district professional development sessions—including institutes and Saturday Reunions at Teachers College—that were directly related to the content and subjects they were responsible for teaching in the classroom. Though not mandated to attend, this group of teachers viewed those opportunities as a way to learn more and then to pass on useful information to others.
Despite Pyhältö, Pietarinen, and Soini’s findings (2012), I would argue that this group of teachers was able nonetheless to practice agency because they leveraged any available opportunities that helped them, as individual teachers and a group, engage in meaningful professional learning and subsequently make changes in their classrooms and school.

This is not at all to suggest that these teachers were spineless or that they did not find the institution of schooling problematic. Far from it, and therefore, the way in which teachers in this study leveraged opportunities seemed to align with what de Certeau (1984) described as tactics. As de Certeau described in his work, tactics are “calculated actions” (p. 37) that are embedded in the everyday practices of the nonpowerful. In his view, tactics take advantage of and depend on opportunities within an institution and represent everyday acts of resistance.

In this study, it certainly appeared that this group of teachers leveraged opportunities and that they quietly navigated constraints and structures in ways that were organically embedded in their everyday practices. However, it must also be said that de Certeau’s (1984) use of the term tactics seems to invoke a battle metaphor, which does not capture the essence of how the teachers in this study leveraged opportunities. In fact, what I found was that these teachers did not leverage opportunities combatively. Instead, they seemed to recognize that they had little say in terms of the initiatives their school and district took up, so they made the best of those initiatives and shaped them into something they knew would benefit their students. Thus, this study’s findings contributed to a conceptualization of agency that is organically grounded in teachers’ everyday practices and genuine care for their students.

Another finding regarding the group of teachers’ savviness about institutional structures was the way in which teachers found work-arounds. In this study, I found that when faced with constraints (i.e., lack of time) that might impede their collective learning, these teachers sought
out accessibility- or time-related work-arounds. For instance, teachers relied heavily on technology, including G Suite for Education and email, to make resources and documents available to their colleagues. When teachers felt an in-person conversation was in order, they often made time outside of the school day to talk with each other about instruction, attempted to maximize their time during lunchtime meetings by focusing on matters they deemed significant at the time, or popped by each other’s classrooms for a quick chat. These work-arounds illustrated Gourd’s (2015) finding that structural constraints do not “dictate action, but simply define the boundaries of choice” (p. 125). In other words, this group of teachers did not choose inaction when faced with structural constraints. Instead, they worked within those boundaries to create and use (digital and nondigital) spaces to support their collective learning. Through these work-arounds, I would argue, teachers demonstrated a responsiveness within the constraints and structures that could have impeded their professional learning. In their study on how agency unfolded in different secondary school settings, Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2012) found that teacher agency was hindered when opportunities for collective work were restricted by constraints. Although time-related constraints certainly impacted how the teachers in my study engaged in their collective learning, the data that were related to this impact certainly did not leave me with a “sense of opportunities missed” (Priestly et al., 2012, p. 10). Rather, the findings of my study showed that this group of teachers seized upon different work-arounds upon encountering institutional structures and constraints as a way to ensure they could continue their collective learning. For instance, the teachers often popped by each other’s classrooms, on their own duty-free time, as a way of staying informed about how their colleagues were teaching specific lessons or content. In other cases, teachers engaged in quick, informal conversations about instructional practice in hallways and stairwells. Like some of the secondary teachers in
Priestly and colleagues’ (2012) study, the teachers in this study clearly faced limitations in terms of when and how they could engage in their collective professional learning. Instead of hindering their professional learning, these constraints played a critical role in how the group worked together, mainly through their creative work-arounds. However, as I will discuss in Chapter 5, this above-and-beyond commitment to their learning and students leaves the group vulnerable to exploitation by administrators looking to capitalize on the time they spend devoting themselves to their professional learning.

Another finding regarding how these teachers demonstrated savviness about institutional structures concerned the way in which the group checked the boxes. For this group of teachers, checking the boxes involved doing what was expected of them. At first glance, it appeared as though the teachers in this study were simply doing their jobs—adhering to the policies and expectations set forth by the district at the expense of their own collective learning. When removed from the larger context of this groups’ professional learning, it might seem as though performativity drives their actions. Ball (2003), drawing on Lyotard’s (1984) seminal work, defined performativity as “a technology, culture, and mode of regulation that employs judgments, comparisons, and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change—based on rewards and sanctions” (p. 216). In Ball’s view, teaching becomes managed by externally enforced (and often vague) measures, which produce uncertainty and confusion.

Within this means of regulation, a teacher’s worth or value in the profession is determined by her performance, or “output,” as Ball refers to it (p. 216). For the teachers in my study, I would argue that checking the boxes was a way to navigate institutional structures by turning performativity on its head. Although they were aware of district and administrator expectations, they did not let these expectations obstruct their collective professional learning or determine
who they were as a group of professionals and learners. For instance, the teachers in this study proactively involved their principal in their professional learning, but did not allow that involvement to change how or when they engaged in their collective learning. Thus, this study’s finding challenged the notion of performativity by capturing the quietly subversive acts that enabled a group of teachers to work around the regulations and expectations so as to continue their professional learning.

In a podcast from Heinemann Publishing, Cornelius Minor, a New York City–based educator known for his work on equity and literacy reforms, argued that bravery is not an innate characteristic, but something we use when we sense a call to advocacy. In explaining this view, he asked, “Where is the revolution for the semibrave person who’s got to pick the kids up by 4:00?” (Minor, 2019). In asking this question, Minor pushed back against binary thinking about the concept of bravery. Like bravery, in much of the academic scholarship currently available, agency is something that often entails an either/or proposition. Teachers either participate in formal professional development opportunities or avoid professional learning completely. Teachers either give in to institutional constraints or push back against them. Teachers either do what is expected of them or completely defy administrative expectations and requirements. However, what I found in this study is that agency is not an either/or, black-or-white construct in the context of professional learning. Agency is not always made up of grand moments or of dismantling systems. Rather, it’s made up of quiet revolutions—semibrave moments grounded in the everyday work of teachers.

**Conclusion of This Section on Being Savvy About Institutional Structures and Processes**

The findings in this section suggested that the teachers in this group were aware of institutional structures and demonstrated a savviness about those structures as they engaged in
their collective professional learning. Whereas studies have focused on teacher agency in the context of educational reforms and constraints that may impact teachers’ enactments of agency, the findings of my study indicated that this group’s agency was not at odds with institutional structures and expectations. For these teachers, agency was context specific and embedded in their everyday professional learning. In the case of this study, agency took the form of a kind of quiet activism. These teachers demonstrated a different way of going about change. There was something natural about teachers’ agency as evidenced by the ways they leveraged opportunities, found work-arounds, and checked the boxes. Therefore, this study suggests that teachers’ agency was an organic part of this group’s growth and development and not something extraordinary or grand.

**Conclusion of This Chapter**

In this qualitative study, I set out to explore what a group of elementary school teachers’ collective professional learning looked like on the ground. Given the influx of teacher accountability and evaluation policies in the U.S., I was eager to try to capture teachers’ grassroots professional learning in the context of their day-to-day experiences. Therefore, the research question guiding this study was, In what ways does a group of elementary school teachers engage in grassroots professional learning with each other? My findings illustrated a much richer and more nuanced conceptualization of grassroots professional learning than I had initially hypothesized, and one more nuanced than that available in the current academic literature, too. This holds implications for both practice and policy, which I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter.

My first theme indicated that personal relationships were an integral aspect of this group’s professional learning. Whereas much of the extant academic literature focuses on
professional learning activities, this theme suggested that the relationships among the teachers in a self-formed group of learners were worth studying closely as well. In the context of the study at hand, particular aspects of these personal relationships (e.g., developing and sustaining relationships, navigating the tricky parts, self-selecting, and nudging others along) actually helped the group to sustain their collective professional learning over time. Significantly, this finding suggested that the various dimensions of these teachers’ personal relationships in this group were interconnected, nuanced, and particular to this group of teachers. Thus, this group of teachers’ professional learning involved ways of caring for each other that could not be generalized or removed from the particular context of their group.

The second theme generated in this study highlighted the well-being of the group and how the group came (and stayed) together over time. Although I anticipated there being common interests around teaching and learning among this group of teachers, I initially had underestimated how important the group’s dimensions would actually be in the context of their professional learning. Underlying the ways in which these teachers stuck together, threw it out there, passed the headset, and tried to contribute to something larger was a collective responsibility to the group itself, their students, and the group’s professional learning. Like the personal relationships teachers in this group developed with each other, the group dynamics were grounded in the local context of the group itself.

The third theme to be generated out of my study suggested that learning was a messy process for this group of teachers. Unsurprisingly, the teachers in the study at hand constructed context-specific understandings over the “life” of their group. However, the findings shed light on just how messy and nonlinear this process was for the group. In fact, through accessing a network of resources, considering what might be useful to others, and trying things out, the
teachers demonstrated how they engaged in this learning process in the context of their day-to-day experiences and responsibilities.

The fourth theme of this study shed light on the ways in which this group of teachers navigated their collective professional learning in spite of the constraints of institutional structures and processes. This theme highlighted how teachers navigated those structures and processes by leveraging opportunities, finding work-arounds, and checking the boxes. In light of this finding, a conceptualization of agency as quiet, everyday acts emerged that was grounded in the daily practices of this group of teachers.

In the final chapter of this report, I revisit my research question and discuss what I believe this study contributes to the field. Based on my findings, I also make recommendations for future research and practice. I close the chapter by reflecting on my own experiences as a researcher in the context of this study.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In the current U.S. climate of teacher accountability, professional learning continues to be regulated by policy and administrative directives rather than choice or self-direction. The purpose of this study was to examine how a group of elementary school teachers engaged collectively in grassroots professional learning with each other in the context of top-down professional development regulations that have prioritized one-size-fits-all approaches to teacher development and served, ultimately, to deprofessionalize teachers. This study provided insight into how a group of literacy teachers identified their own professional learning needs and engaged in that learning with their colleagues. The findings of this study suggest that this group of teachers did invest in their own professional learning in ways that benefited themselves and their colleagues and students.

In light of all this, the concept of grassroots learning built by my analyses and interpretations offers a necessarily messy and nuanced characterization of professional learning that is grounded in teachers’ day-to-day responsibilities, practices, and personal relationships. This following question framed this qualitative study: In what ways does a group of elementary school teachers engage in grassroots professional learning with each other? A qualitative methodological approach (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was used to investigate this research question and identify significant patterns in the data. As a result of my analyses, I identified four key themes that provided a series of important insights into the way this particular group of teachers engaged in collective professional learning. Despite the particularity of my study, I argue that these findings resonate well beyond this group and capture important elements of grassroots learning that can usefully inform professional learning. At the
same time, I acknowledge that grassroots learning cannot be replicated in any artificial way, because it is grown and shaped over time by the teachers themselves.

**Summary of This Study’s Findings**

Key findings of this study included the following:

1. Grassroots professional learning involved a relational dimension best described as an openness to learning with others that is nondefensive, expansive, and responsive to one’s own and others’ needs (whether those be instructional, social, emotional, etc.).

2. Grassroots professional learning involved context-specific dynamics that brought the group together and helped them sustain their collective learning over time. These dynamics included an appreciation for diversity of thought and perspective, the ebb and flow of leadership in the group’s day-to-day practices, no-obligation opportunities to “steal” resources, and a shared vision of what teachers wanted for themselves professionally and for their students.

3. Grassroots professional learning involved a messy, nonlinear learning process that directly challenges the conceptions of social learning used to frame this study in that teachers often fell upon resources and information by happenstance (as opposed to purposefully and consistently seeking it out), balanced information that was both pushed and pulled to them, attended to the potential needs of others when accessing resources, and tried out new ideas and resources in the contexts of their classrooms.

4. Grassroots professional learning involved a savviness about institutional structures and processes, which contributed to a more nuanced conceptualization of agency that was grounded in teachers’ everyday (and quiet) practices of leveraging opportunities, finding work-arounds, and checking the boxes.
Although professional learning is often seen as a single, monolithic thing (e.g., teachers are learning), this study found that such learning was, in fact, multifaceted, often messy, and nonlinear. The four teachers in this study were doing more than just learning. They were also making the time to support each other and the group and to navigate the structures and constraints they encountered in smart and informed ways. In looking back at the literature I reviewed in preparation for this study, I found that much of the scholarship I drew on in this report offered an idealized perspective of how teacher learning happens day-to-day. However, the findings of this study provided a more nuanced and complex view of professional learning that is also highly effective and sustained over time. Having provided a summary of the four major findings of this study, I now discuss what these findings contribute to the field.

This Study’s Contributions to the Field

Looking across the four themes of this study, which I identified above, one of this study’s contributions to the field of teacher development is a conceptualization of social learning theory that is much more complex and messier than it is often represented as being in the academic literature. This study’s findings strongly suggested that the individual relationships that were developed, sustained, and nurtured organically were integral to the group’s learning. Although the literature on social learning theory certainly emphasizes the social interaction, conversations, and common values shared in a group, my study suggested that those conceptualizations are often idealized and fail to capture what social learning theory looks like on the ground. As I discussed in Chapter 4, missing from the literature on social learning theory is a recognition of the tricky, or challenging, aspects of a group’s collective learning and how a group of learners works through those challenges so that they can continue to learn and grow together. Additionally, the importance of diversity of thought and perspective in a group is downplayed in
the literature on social learning theory. However, the findings of this study suggested that a deep appreciation for the know-how and expertise that individual teachers brought to the group enabled the participants to benefit from the diversity of perspectives among them and thus helped to sustain this group’s learning over time.

This study’s findings also drew attention to what the enactment of agency looks like in daily practice for teachers. As I discussed earlier, agency, as it emerged from the data, was not a capacity that teachers either had or did not have. Rather, teachers acted with agency when they made choices or created stuff in ways that benefited both themselves and the group. Notably, the personal relationships among teachers in this group and a genuine care for their students shaped how they enacted agency. In a time when teacher effectiveness is at the forefront of policy and reforms, this group of teachers still chose to take risks with their teaching for the good of their students and developed a savviness about institutional structures and processes. That being said, my study contributes to the field of teacher development a conceptualization of agency that is grounded in teachers’ daily realities, including their responsibilities and practices.

Finally, this research study adds to our understanding of research methodologies and data collection. Specifically, my use of G Suite for Education, including the use of the chat feature to engage asynchronously with participants, offers insights into how we can engage in research with teachers themselves. In using G Suite for Education for the purposes of this study, teachers contributed artifacts in a digital space that showcased their learning in the context of the group. The chat feature allowed us to engage in revealing conversations about the teacher-selected artifacts. Had I relied exclusively on teachers’ accounts of their learning as reported in interviews, I would not have been able to develop such a rich conceptualization of grassroots learning. Equally important, if not more so, the use of G Suite for Education helped me make a
space in the research for the voices of the teachers, who engage in grassroots professional learning with others.

**Implications for Future Research**

As discussed in Chapter 2, much of the research on professional learning has focused on the characteristics of effective professional development, on teachers’ learning activities, or on mandated professional development. Little research, to date, has studied what I describe as grassroots professional learning. In conducting my research study, I needed to find an accessible group of teachers who engaged in this type of learning. As I discussed previously, the group that was accessible to me consisted of four white women teaching in an upper middle-class suburban school district. I acknowledge that this particular group makeup (all women, all working in suburban, well-funded schools) may have skewed my findings. A possibility for future studies could be to consider the role of gender in the organic formation of a grassroots group or the ways in which grassroots learning is enacted by different groups of teachers (i.e., mixed gender, all males, etc.). Given Jusinski’s (2018b) recent findings about an all-female group of knowledge broker teachers, it could be interesting to explore whether all-female grassroots groups in schools are anomalies, or not.

Although the scope of my study did not extend to the other teachers with whom this group engaged and interacted daily, the participating teachers did mention their interactions and experiences with other teachers who taught the humanities in their grade levels or in their school. However, when identifying a group for this study, the access teacher did not identify those particular teachers as part of the group with whom she worked closely. Therefore, another possibility for future research could be to look beyond a core group of teachers who engage in grassroots learning and study the teachers who are not considered participants in the group but
are tied to the group in some way. This research could contribute to a deeper understanding of what grassroots learning looks like from the perspective of those teachers who are not considered participants in the group but may participate in (or be recipients of) the group’s professional learning. Research focused on the teachers on the periphery of this group could also help scholars better understand grassroots learning in the larger context of the relationships and connections among the educators in a school setting.

Although my study did not specifically focus on the language teachers used with and among each other as they engaged in grassroots learning, there were sufficient data to suggest that future research on the role of talk in teachers’ informal professional learning could be warranted. As discussed previously, teachers used storytelling and humor to sustain their connections in the group. Although scholars like Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2017) have studied the role of teacher talk in the context of agency, it would be interesting to examine more closely the role of talk in the context of grassroots learning. This research would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how learning happens in a grassroots way and how this talk supports the group’s relationships and collective professional learning.

**Implications for Practice**

The purpose of this study was to shed light on how a group of literacy teachers identified their own professional learning needs and engaged in that learning with each other. Although this study provided insights into the ways in which this group of teachers engaged in grassroots learning, I am not suggesting that grassroots professional learning, as it unfolded for these teachers, be replicated in schools. In fact, the findings of this study suggest that the four teachers in this study engaged in grassroots learning within the structures and constraints of their district. Thus, teachers’ professional learning was specific to this local context, supportive of their
personal relationships with each other, and embedded in their day-to-day routines and instructional practices. Given the highly contextualized nature of teachers’ learning in this study, trying to replicate this enactment of grassroots learning elsewhere might prove ineffective and less organic. Although there have certainly been policies and mandates put in place to standardize approaches to professional development or determine what counts as professional learning, I argue that teachers’ grassroots learning was informal and driven by this group’s needs and interests and, therefore, cannot be standardized or prescriptive. To make it so would be to minimize the organic nature of teachers’ work—and to misunderstand the ongoing and messy process of learning and supporting each other. That being said, there are certainly aspects of grassroots learning that can usefully inform professional learning in schools. Therefore, administrators might consider ways to remove barriers to this type of learning. Small gestures like facilitating interclassroom visits or making time during faculty meetings for informal conversations about instruction and practices could help to support and foster grassroots learning in schools.

In terms of grassroots learning, it is important to keep in mind that the personal-relationships dimension of professional learning is so often overlooked in schools, particularly in the context of professional learning communities. As I discussed in Chapter 2, scholars have long advocated for the creation of professional learning communities in schools (Abbott et al., 2018; Brown, Horn, & King, 2018; DuFour, 2011; DuFour & Reeves, 2016; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010; Schaap & de Bruijn, 2018). They argue that professional learning communities help systematically improve instruction and student achievement through sustained teacher collaboration. However, when professional learning communities are enacted (or mandated) in schools, teachers’ personal relationships with each
other often are not taken into account, which might contribute to why professional learning communities might not reach their full potential. In fact, the findings of this study indicate that these very relationships helped to support and sustain teachers’ professional learning over time. Although the teachers in this study clearly were committed to improving their instruction and understanding of content they taught, they also were dedicated to growing their personal relationships with each other. Taking into account this finding, I would argue that it is critical for administrators and supervisors to be aware of teachers’ personal relationships when supporting collaborative professional learning in schools. Perhaps one way school leaders might begin to recognize the human and social dimensions of learning, rather than simply regarding learning as a transactional process from expert to learner, is to take notice of who engages in informal learning with each other and what that learning looks like on the ground. Again, although I am not advocating that grassroots learning be formalized in schools, administrators can consider infusing choice into school- or district-based professional development, so that teachers can identify their own learning needs and seek out other teachers who might offer expertise in a particular area.

As I discussed earlier, there has been a push to mandate and standardize professional learning across the U.S. Despite this widespread culture of accountability, teachers, as the findings of this study show, are finding ways to pursue meaningful professional learning with others. As evidenced by the grassroots learning in which this group of teachers engaged during my study, professional learning involved such aspects as scrolling through Twitter or trying things out with colleagues. Again, I am not suggesting that grassroots learning is a prescription for organic professional learning in schools. Rather, I would invite administrators to push back against systems and policies that measure professional development in terms of hours or
attendance at workshops. The group of teachers in this study clearly devoted substantial time and effort to attend to their professional learning interests and needs. However, in the current climate of accountability, their grassroots learning would not necessarily be recognized as professional development or counted as professional development hours. I caution administrators against defining professional learning in a one-size-fits-all manner. To do so would risk minimizing the everyday professional learning of teachers.

My Own Reflection as a Researcher

As a former elementary teacher with over 15 years of experience, I designed this study to learn more about the ways in which a group of teachers engaged in their own professional learning in a culture of accountability. Over the years, I attended hundreds of hours of professional development sessions—some more useful than others—that counted toward the state-mandated requirement. Like the teachers in this study, I also spent time early before the school day began, during my lunch period, and after school working with my colleagues seeking information and resources that would help us improve our instruction and better meet the needs of our students. At times, it seemed that the informal collective work we were doing was at odds with a district and larger educational system that valued professional development that looked more like traditional expert-led workshops or keynote speeches. These feelings of frustration led to my idea of grassroots learning and this qualitative study.

When I ultimately set out to conduct this research study, I considered it an opportunity (and privilege) to make a space in academia for the voices of teachers who engage in grassroots learning with little formal recognition of the professional work they do. Thus, I was committed to conducting a research study wherein the participants felt as though they were engaging in this research with me. Throughout the process, I tried to be mindful of teachers’ time, knowing
firsthand that what I was asking of them in this study only added to their already-heavy workloads. I do feel as though my insiderliness helped me to balance my role as a researcher and my experiences as a former teacher.

During our final interview, I was eager to learn from the four participating teachers about the sense they made of this experience. In very different ways, they each expressed an appreciation for having been seen, having the opportunity to talk about their professional learning, or being able to interrogate why they engage in this kind of collective learning. Emma summed up the group’s sentiment when she admitted the following about her participation in this study: “I felt like what I was doing was kind of being heard. . . . I feel like the things that I was saying, that I was sharing, were valued” (Emma, Interview 3, December 16, 2018). In summary, the findings of this study intentionally—but unapologetically—highlight the value in teachers’ pursuing their own professional learning in a grassroots manner and, I argue, demonstrably help us rethink what efficacious professional learning does and can look like in the daily lives of teachers.

**Conclusion**

Much of the literature on professional development conveys the idea that professional learning is something that is neat and uniform across all learners and contexts. In the current culture of teacher accountability, policies mirror this conceptualization. Overlooked by both policy and scholarship is the multifaceted nature of professional learning. This study’s findings highlight a nuanced, messy, and complex view of professional learning that is grounded in teachers’ daily work and personal relationships. As I have discussed, I am hopeful that what I have conceptualized as grassroots learning can help us begin to rethink formal approaches to
professional development and teacher learning so as to take more fully into account the homegrown and human dimensions of professional learning.
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