INFLUENCE OF INVITATIONAL SUMMER INSTITUTE OF THE
NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT ON TEACHERS AND THEIR PRACTICE:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis [dissertation] is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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ABSTRACT
As schools and the faculty are increasingly under scrutiny for student achievement outcomes, professional development is becoming a way for districts and schools to show a commitment to instructional improvement. They are required to establish practices and allocate funds for professional development. Teachers are required to grow professionally as well, in order to maintain teaching credentials. Understanding the characteristics that contribute to effective professional development experiences is essential for teachers, administrators, and district personnel to determine if they are spending their time and their money wisely. In this phenomenological inquiry I explored the lived experiences of nine teacher participants in the Invitational Summer Institute of the National Writing Project. The purpose of the research was to try and capture the essence of the experience through focus group interviews in order to reveal how participation in this unique professional development opportunity has influenced teachers’ attitudes and classroom teaching practices.

Keywords: phenomenology; professional development; andragogy; adult learning, collegiality, National Writing Project
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the phenomenal teachers from whom I have learned, with whom I have worked, and with whom I have collaborated in the 15 years I have spent in the field of education. Never have teachers been more scrutinized and criticized than they are in current time. You continue to inspire me to be my best, by working countless hours, developing your skills on and off the clock, and most importantly by caring tirelessly for each of the young lives you touch. I especially want to thank the teachers who graciously participated in my study. I hope your knowledge, your experiences, and your feelings will give voice to what matters for teachers in professional development.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Background

Teachers have long been expected to model for students what it means to be lifelong learners. State certification boards require teachers to keep current on innovative strategies, current research, and teaching techniques to improve their practice and maintain their teaching credentials. Some teachers choose to pursue advanced degrees and professional development at their own expense, taking graduate courses at universities and online; joining professional organizations for teachers; and traveling to educational conferences and workshops throughout the country and the world. However, school districts have taken increased responsibility for professional development programs since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB).

Under NCLB, school administrators and school districts were required to document the degree to which teachers were “highly qualified,” which is defined as having a bachelor’s degree, full state certification or licensure, and proof the teacher knows each subject they teach (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Proof of knowledge of the subject area could be met with a subject area examination or a combination of teaching experience, professional development, and knowledge in the subject gained from years teaching in the subject. NCLB, in accordance with the definition of a “highly qualified” teacher, required professional development to be “high quality” professional development. This included activities that, “Are sustained, intensive, and classroom-focused in order to have a positive and lasting impact on classroom instruction and the teacher’s performance in the classroom; and are not 1-day or short-term workshops or conferences …” (Title IX, Section 9101(34)). NCLB outlined specific requirements for the
allocation of funds and the provision of professional development for states and school districts receiving federal funding. Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos (2009) reported 10% of Title I allocations for low-performing schools, and more than $3 billion in funding has been allocated for professional development as a result of Title II.

In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education released an Executive Summary of Race to the Top, a program to encourage American schools and districts to compete for federal funding. In the Race to the Top Program, the term highly qualified was abandoned for the term “highly effective.” Any school district receiving Race to the Top funds would now be required to link the effectiveness of teachers to student achievement data, rather than teacher credentials. According to Race to the Top effective teachers are those whose students show at least one year of academic growth per year according to state assessments; highly effective teachers are those whose students show at least a year and a half of growth per year. Race to the Top requires the provision of coaching and professional development, especially “effective data-driven” professional development (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

**Statement of Problem**

Professional development, more than ever, is focused on how teachers can improve their classroom practice in order to increase student achievement. The stakes are higher than ever, and millions of dollars in funding is spent to ensure teachers are highly effective. District and school administrators need to understand what types of professional development experiences are meaningful for teachers and how those experiences lead to changes in classroom instruction. Current financial investment in professional development and education reform are dependent on the provision of effective professional development, therefore the knowledge base on what works must be strengthened (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002).
Brief Summary of Literature Review

Professional Development. Many terms have been used to define or describe professional development: workshop, in-service, training, institute, seminar, and conference, to name a few. According to NCLB, professional development is sustained, intensive, and classroom-focused; it is not a one-day workshop or short term conference. Studies of professional development however, often find a considerable gap between the conditions suggested to be optimal for professional learning and those provided (Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, A, 2005). Guskey and Yoon (2009) synthesized 1,300 studies from the American Institutes for Research, and found some workshops can be wasteful, but studies showing positive relationships between professional development and increased student achievement involved workshops or summer institutes grounded in research-based practices. According to Sparks (2002), most staff development and school improvement activities fail to incorporate teachers’ knowledge and skills. As a result, teachers find staff development demeaning and mind-numbing because they are expected to just sit and receive what hired experts are there to give them.

Professional development, once considered teacher training, must now be treated as adult learning (Fullan, 2008; Easton, 2008), not a project to be completed (Sparks, 2002). Teachers need more than training about specific packaged programs or curriculum materials if they are going to make meaningful and sustainable changes to improve their instruction (Kemp, 2011). Knowledge must be at the forefront of improvement, and learning must be a part of the day-to-day culture for everyone in schools, including teachers (Fullan, 2008). When student achievement is the ultimate goal, teacher knowledge and instructional practice, is an equally important consideration.
Studies and experts in the field have suggested best practices in professional development (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Desimone, et. al.; 2002; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2007; Guskey, 2002; Sparks, 2002; Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Though no single definitive practice or set of practices has been agreed upon, Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2007) summarized professional development to include any experience that enlarges a teacher’s knowledge, appreciation, skills, and understanding of his or her work. The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) formalized the definition of professional development for the reauthorization of NCLB 2001. “The term professional development means a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers’ and principals’ effectiveness in raising student achievement” (Learning Forward, 2011). These opportunities may be available through coursework, workshops, institutes, and conferences provided by entities within or outside the school system (Learning Forward, 2011).

High quality professional development incorporates characteristics such as collaboration (Darling-Hammond, et. al, 2009; Gordon, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2007); adult learning principles (Sparks, 2002; Gordon, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009); involvement of participants in planning and implementation (Colbert, et. al., 2008; Loucks-Horsley, 2003; Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1989; Gordon, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2007); and support for transfer of learning into the classroom (Gordon, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2007; Guskey & Yoon, 2008; Eaker, Dufour, & Dufour, 2008; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Darling-Hammond, et. al., 2009). Furthermore, professional development is only effective if it results in teachers improving instruction (Guskey, 2002; Sparks, 2002; Mizell, 2010). While the effectiveness of professional development is often measured by the impact on
student achievement, the NSDC suggests, “The impact of professional development on teacher knowledge and instructional practice is also relevant, as these are worthwhile outcomes in themselves that support increased learning for students” (Wei, et. al., 2009, section 3 p.3). The extent to which teachers believe themselves to be capable of influencing student achievement must also be considered, as self-efficacy may determine how much effort teachers put forth in their endeavors (Bandura, 2006; Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008).

**Collaboration.** According to Sparks (2002), high quality professional development is founded on a sense of collegiality and collaboration among and between teachers. Teaching improves when teachers are given time to share best practices, review student work, and plan curriculum lessons together (Wei, et. al., 2009). Synthesis of professional development research by Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) also suggested successful programs support collaboration and collegiality. Sparks (2006) suggested establishing practices that lead to trust, mutual respect, continuous positive improvement, and team-focused collaboration are important for building culture in schools. The process of learning in small groups in which the atmosphere is trusting and supportive makes the difference (Dunn, Nave, & Lewis, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Eaker, Dufour, and Dufour (2008) also found in their work with professional learning communities, the best professional development is social and collaborative. Professional learning communities are created in order for staff members to provide meaningful and sustained assistance for each other to improve teaching and learning (Sparks, 2002). Learning Forward, previously the NSDC, outlines four standards for professional learning, the first of which is Learning Communities. Professional learning that increases teacher effectiveness and learning for all students occurs in professional learning communities (Learning Forward, 2011).
Wenger (2002) referred to this type of social learning as a community of practice. A community of practice is a group of people who share a common concern or passion for something they do, and can be characterized by their desire to interact regularly to improve their practice. According to Wenger (2006), communities of practice influence educational practice internally, externally, and over the lifetime of the students, and have three distinct characteristics: domain, which includes commitment to and competence in the domain; community, which includes member interaction and relationship building; and practice, a shared set of resources and repertoire between the practitioners. When the passion and experience teachers bring to the learning community are incorporated, the basic tenets of adult learning principle are acknowledged.

**Adult Learning.** Effective professional development also incorporates adult learning principles. Adults are most ready to learn when they are actively involved in the learning process, to solve real-life problems (Knowles, 1980; Mizell, 2008) much like a community of practice. But most professional development and school improvement plans leave teachers’ knowledge and skills virtually untouched (Sparks, 2002). “Fewer than half of teachers reported participating in professional development that often involved active learning opportunities, and fewer than one out of five teachers reported that the activities built on what they learned in previous professional development experiences” (Birman, et. al., 2009, p.90). Professional development design needs to address how teachers learn, and provide active learning opportunities to help teachers transform their teaching (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Teachers who engage in rich, rigorous, and engaging professional development experiences can create the same types of experiences for their students. According to Mezirow (1996), this type of learning is transforming.
Transformative professional development is emerging in the service professions as a new approach to professional development (Jurow, 2009; View & DeMulder, 2009). Grounded in the transformative learning theory of Mezirow (1996), transformative professional development acknowledges the experiences and knowledge of the participants as a valuable component to the learning situation (Jurow, 2009). The primary tenet of transformative learning is the recognition of the contribution of the learners’ experiences and knowledge to the learning environment and, as those experiences merge with new experiences, changes in attitudes and beliefs, or paradigm shifts may occur (Clark, 1993). According to Mezirow (1996), the way humans communicate and how we engage in critical reflection and discourse is a key component of transformative learning.

Transformative teaching makes the distinction between transmission of knowledge as an entity and the active participation of learners, and what they contribute in knowledge and experience to the learning situation (Mezirow, 1996). These deep changes, as described by Sparks (2002) are necessary to affect teacher beliefs and assumptions about learning, teaching, and leadership that will result in achievement of student and adult learning goals.

**Teacher Choice.** In his work on adult learning theory, Knowles (1984) asserted learning is primarily intrinsically motivated. “There is evidence suggesting that professional development efforts that specifically address teachers’ meanings maybe particularly successful… that is, how they perceive themselves, how they present themselves, what they consider important—in short, their entire professional identity” (van den Berg, 2002, p. 589 ). Teachers are not often involved in selecting and planning professional development activities, and professional development is not always closely tied to classroom practice (Colbert. et. al., 2008). However one of the principles of adult learning theory is adults learn best when they initiate and assist in the
planning of their learning activities (Knowles, 1984) rather than being forced to spend time on topics and content they consider to be less relevant. Self-selection of learning goals based on personal assessment is likely to result in higher motivation for learning (Knowles, 1984; Loucks-Horsley, 2003; Sparks & Loucks-Horsely, 1989). Therefore, teachers who are afforded the opportunity to identify and select areas for professional development may be more likely to make changes to their teaching practice and have an increased positive effect on their students.

When professional development is carefully selected and planned, it has the potential for deep change in the knowledge, beliefs, and behavior of teachers, and the performance of their students (Sparks & Loucks-Horsely, 1989). Gains in student achievement are an important consideration when planning professional development, however teacher-driven professional development also empowers teachers, builds confidence, and helps build feelings of efficacy and professionalism (Colbert, et al., 2008). Educational decision-makers can better utilize the opportunities available to them by working in a more facilitative manner with the individual teacher (van der Berg, 2002).

**Self-Efficacy.** According to Bandura (2006) efficacy affects whether people think positively or negatively; influences their pursuits and goals, and commitment to each; and directly impacts how much effort they put into their endeavors. Further, Schwarzer and Hallum (2008) suggested self-efficacy has an influence on action because self-related thoughts are a major component in motivation. Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to choose challenging tasks, set higher goals, and stick to the tasks until the goals are achieved, no matter the obstacles they experience in the process (Bandura, 1997; Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008). Based on social-cognitive theory, a teacher’s self-efficacy may be conceptualized as the belief in his or her ability to plan and execute the tasks deemed necessary to achieve educational goals, such as an increase
in student achievement (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Ingvarson, et. al. (2005) also posited that teacher self-efficacy depends on how much teachers feel their practices have improved, thus resulting in student learning outcomes being improved as well. In contrast, when educators believe that factors beyond their control, such as poverty, language barriers, and unstable family lives, make learning insurmountable, they believe themselves to have little capacity for positively affecting their students. This lack of self-efficacy impacts their attitudes and motivation. They do not seek and apply new learning to overcome their challenges, and their students act as they do (Mizell, 2008).

“Professional development should be a natural and powerful tool for strengthening the self-efficacy of educators” (Mizell, 2008, p. 3). In a study of professional development programs in Australia, Ivarson, et. al, (2008) discovered that a focus on content and active learning opportunities resulted in an increase in teacher confidence and self-efficacy. Graham, Harris, Fink, and MacArthur (2001) found teacher efficacy to be a powerful indicator in elementary school teachers’ positive practices in teaching writing.

**National Writing Project.** The National Writing Project (NWP) is a nationwide network of sites that includes and serves educators from all disciplines, across all levels, from early childhood through university. The NWP “focuses the knowledge, expertise, and leadership of our nation's educators on sustained efforts to improve writing and learning for all learners” (NWP.org, 2011). NWP members collectively conduct and publish research, develop resources, and provide professional development. The core principles of the NWP model provide specific characteristics of effective professional development:
• Teachers at every level—from kindergarten through college—are the agents of reform; universities and schools are ideal partners for investing in reform through professional development.

• Professional development programs should provide opportunities for teachers to work together to understand the full spectrum of writing development across grades and across subject areas.

• Effective professional development programs provide frequent and ongoing opportunities for teachers to write and to examine theory, research, and practice together systematically.

• Teachers who are well informed and effective in their practice can be successful teachers of other teachers as well as partners in educational research, development, and implementation. Collectively, teacher-leaders are our greatest resource for educational reform. (NWP.org, About section para. 8, 2011)

Teachers’ initial induction to the NWP is the Invitational Summer Institute (ISI). The ISI is an intensive, month-long collaborative and inquiry-based learning opportunity for teachers to expand their knowledge of writing and teaching writing. The ISI provides an opportunity for teachers to share and critique each other’s work, inform their practice through research and theory, and participate in leadership notably different than what they experience as teachers in their own school. Teachers often describe their experience in the summer institute as life-changing (Boykin, Z., Scrivner, J., & Robbins, S., 2004) and transformative (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2007). Participants in the ISI have the opportunity to earn graduate credits at the host university, may become Teacher Consultants for NWP, and are introduced to a whole network of people through the local site. Once they have completed the ISI, participants become part of a
network of teacher consultants (TC) for NWP. As TC’s, teachers provide mentoring and professional development for other teachers; they may present at future NWP conferences, provide onsite professional development at local schools, or participate in larger literacy conferences.

Statement of Purpose

Districts and schools are required under federal education law, to establish practices and programs for professional development, and to allocate funds to facilitate such programs (NCLB 2001, Title I). Teachers also have a responsibility to continue their education by increasing knowledge and skills, and changing behaviors to improve their students’ achievement and to maintain their teaching credentials. Currently, some of the systems in place for district and school professional development are relatively void of individual teacher input, deferring to decisions by committees or administrator-appointed groups, and curriculum mandates from the district and state (Kemp, 2011). However, some teachers are in search of personal and professional growth and a desire to connect with other teachers to improve their practice and increase self-efficacy. According to van den Berg (2008), professional development of teachers appears to depend on the associations they make between their own personal meanings, their work, and the acquisition of new methods of teaching. The purpose of this study will be to capture the experience of the Invitational Summer Institute of the National Writing Project, and the influence of the experience on participants’ teaching practice.

Research Questions

1. What is the lived experience of participants in the Invitational Summer Institute of the National Writing Project?
a. In what ways does the experience of the ISI influence teacher perception of self-efficacy?

b. In what ways does the experience of the ISI influence teacher perception of practice?

c. In what ways does the participants’ perception of the influence of the ISI change over time?

**Definition of Terms**

ANDROGOGY- the theory of adult learning as described by Knowles (1980, 1984).

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE- a group of people who share a common concern or passion for something they do, and can be characterized by their desire to interact regularly to improve their practice (Wenger, 2006).

HIGHLY EFFECTIVE TEACHER- teachers whose students show at least a year and a half of growth per year on standardized assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHER- a teacher who has a bachelor’s degree, full state certification or licensure, and proof the teacher knows each subject they teach (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

INVITATIONAL SUMMER INSTITUTE (ISI) - an intensive, month-long collaborative and inquiry-based learning opportunity at the National Writing Project sites, for teachers to expand their knowledge of writing and teaching writing.

NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT (NWP) - a nationwide network of sites that includes and serves educators from all disciplines, from early childhood through university, focusing on sustained efforts to improve writing and learning for all learners.

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT (NCLB) - federal legislation that enacts the theories of standards-based education reform. Pursuant to 20 USCS § 6301, NCLB ensures that all children
have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY (PLC)- Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

RACE TO THE TOP PROGRAM- “a competitive grant program, [through the U.S. Department of Education] designed to encourage and reward States that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform; achieving significant improvement in student outcomes, including making substantial gains in student achievement, closing achievement gaps, improving high school graduation rates, and ensuring student preparation for success in college and careers; and implementing ambitious plans [for education reform]” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 2).

TEACHER CONSULTANT (TC) – once teachers complete the NWP Invitational Summer Institute, they are eligible to become a teacher consultant for NWP, providing professional development for other teachers.

TEACHER SELF-EFFICACY – an individual teacher’s belief in their own ability to plan, organize, and carry out activities required to attain given educational goals and influence valued student outcomes (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010).

TITLE I- section of NCLB established with the purpose of ensuring that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum,
proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments (Title I, 1965).

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING- “the process of using prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162).

Study Overview

This qualitative phenomenology expanded on a pilot study (Kemp, 2011, unpublished) of six teachers who participated in the Invitational Summer Institutes of the National Writing Project at Florida Gulf Coast University, over the course of several years. The primary question of the pilot study was: What was the lived experience of the Invitational Summer Institute (ISI) of the National Writing Project (NWP) like for participants? Participants reported changes in classroom teaching, including broader application of the teaching of writing, greater empathy with students, and increased instructional risk-taking. Kemp (2011, unpublished) summarized the findings based on four assumptions of Knowles (1980) adult learning theory: 1) Adults have a deep psychological need to be generally self-directing; 2) As people develop they accumulate experiences, and people attach more meaning to learning gained from experience. Therefore primary techniques in adult education should be experiential; 3) Adults’ readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of their social roles; and 4) Adult learners see education as a process of increasing competence and therefore desire immediacy of application.

In an effort to strengthen the results of the original study through triangulation with additional focus groups, this phenomenological study consisted of two additional focus groups of ISI participants. As in the pilot, the Teacher Consultants shared their experiences in an effort to
reveal what aspects of the Summer Institute made this a meaningful professional development experience. The original pilot study, though revealing, focused on a group of only six individuals. Through purposive selection of teacher participants, the new study provided additional voices. The sample for this study was purposive, as participants had the specific characteristic of having experienced the ISI of the NWP. However, selection was as heterogeneous as possible in demographic and professional characteristics within the sample collection (Creswell, 2007). Great effort was be made to include participants from diverse ethnicities, levels of teaching, and school settings. I also tried to include teachers of various students with varied demographics in order to consider whether cultural background may affect the long term effects of the experience.

A preliminary survey was distributed by the NWP network site directors’ contact lists via email and/or traditional mail, to gather basic information about site membership, year of participation in the ISI, and interest in participation. Multiple opportunities for teachers to participate were provided to allow teachers to select the one that best fits their personality and availability: (a) personal narrative; (b) face-to-face focus groups; and (c) phone interview. The addition of the personal narrative option was provided to attract participants who were unable to travel to the focus group site, or who may have been more comfortable sharing individually. Phone interviews allowed participation by those who are at a great distance from the study site.

The goal of phenomenological research is enriching the understanding of the experience. The sample size was small because qualitative phenomenological research relies on the personal experiences and interaction of the individuals participating in the study (Polkinghorne, 2005). Two static focus groups each consisting of 4-5 Teacher Consultants met for three discussion/interview sessions ranging from one to two hours each, and were recorded.
According to Polkinghorne (2005), one 1-hour session is not sufficient for obtaining the rich descriptions needed for worthwhile findings. Focus group data was recorded via audiotape and all data was professionally transcribed, and reviewed by the researcher.

Phenomenology is not prefigured; it seeks to describe the experience shared by the participants. The purpose of the study was to capture what about the ISI was transformative, thus recurring themes in the literature on transformative learning were expected to emerge, just as in the pilot study. However, additional themes emerged and were explored further as discussion progressed. These emerging themes were also be revisited in the subsequent sessions. Once these themes are recognized, I used them to describe the lived experience of the participants.

The selective or highlighting approach as described by van Manen (1990, pp. 93-94) was used to identify phrases that stood out in the interview transcripts and personal narratives, that seemed to be thematic of the experience of the Invitational Summer Institute. These themes were used by the researcher and the participants in follow-up conversations, to reflect back on the original phenomenological question in the iterative process described by Polkinghorne (2005). The interview transcripts and personal narratives were coded for themes, and synthesized into an interpretive narrative.

**Significance of the Study**

Professional development is a growing responsibility of state, district, and school-based administrators, under NCLB and the Race to the Top program. A significant amount of schools’ budget dollars are being allocated, and administrators are actively engaged in the search for meaningful programs and experiences to improve teaching, thereby increasing student achievement. Participants in the NWP Summer Institute develop their capacity as leaders at their
schools, and their understanding of what it means to be a professional colleague is transformed bringing new vision to their classrooms (Boykin, Z., Scrivner, J., & Robbins, S, 2004). Gleaning knowledge of the phenomena of the Summer Institute and what, if any unique elements create a successful professional development experience, provided valuable information for planning additional programs. Staff development planners will be able to identify specific characteristics reported by teachers to have affected their classroom instruction. Therefore, this study is significant for district staff development departments, educational administrators, teachers, and ultimately the students in the teachers’ classrooms. However, this study may yield an additional significance for teachers. By sharing their thoughts and feelings about their participation, and noting common themes in their lived experiences during the Summer Institute, teachers will be given voice about what works in professional development and why (Kemp, 2011, unpublished). According to Mezirow (1997), voice will help teachers develop greater autonomy as people, empowering them and increasing their sense of efficacy.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the education climate of the 21st century, the criterion by which teachers are being measured is student performance (Guskey, 2002). Policymakers have recognized schools can only be as good as the teachers and administrators who work within them, and reformers and policy makers have begun to realize the importance of high quality professional development (Sparks, 2002). Therefore, when students do not achieve, school improvement plans are put into place and high quality professional development becomes one of the key components of the plan (Guskey, 2002). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 requires that states ensure the availability of "high-quality" professional development for all teachers. However the law does not answer questions such as what constitutes high-quality professional development or how professional development should be made available to teachers (Borko, 2004), and “The professional learning opportunities for most teachers are woefully inadequate to meet the demands of today’s classrooms” (Sparks, 2002, p. 15).

A Recent History of Professional Development (1995-2010)

In 1995, the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) established national standards for professional development. The same year, the Florida legislature passed 1012.98 School Community Professional Development Act, which established the state’s expectations for each school district’s professional development plan. It required Florida school districts to develop professional development plans in consultation with teachers, state university and college faculty, representatives of business and the community, local education foundations, regional educational consortia, and professional organizations. A legislative directive in 1996 required the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) to review all state funded in-service programs, and
Commissioner of Education, Frank Brogan, hired Dr. Bruce Joyce to evaluate professional development in the entire state. In 1997, Joyce published the report in which he suggested professional development systems in Florida schools were not effective in leading to improvement in student achievement (Florida House of Representatives, 2008). Joyce recommended, “A systemic change in the organization of schools to create a workplace for teachers that ensures life-long learning or a collaborative, collegial, self-renewing culture in schools” (Flores, 2008, p.7). During the next 3 to 4 years, additional Florida statutes were implemented mandating further requirements in professional development programs such as the inclusion of follow up and support, the use of student achievement data, and evaluation of the effectiveness of professional development activities. In 2000, the legislature made it mandatory by law for all districts to submit professional development systems and substantial revisions for approval by the FDOE.

In 2001 the Staff Development Council revised the professional development standards for alignment with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The NCLB act requires any state that receives Title I funds to adopt a state plan with measurable objectives to increase the percentage of teachers who receive high-quality professional development. That same year, in response to the 1997 study, the FDOE developed Florida’s Protocol System, “to assess professional development systems against 66 state standards, which are based on state and federal requirements and national standards for staff development” (Flores, 2008, p. 1). In 2006, the Florida legislature passed a law requiring the state’s professional development plan for teachers to align with the recommendations of the NSDC.

In 2008, the Schools and Learning Council, of the Florida House of Representatives, released a project report about teacher professional development in Florida. The Council
examined the changes in professional development since the inception of the Protocol System by interviewing school district personnel throughout the state. The report suggested overall improved professional development practices. However, areas still in need of work were implementation of learning communities, which was the lowest rated of all standards; the quality of follow up after professional development activities; and job-embedded time for professional development. Recommendations by interview participants included easier ways to track and allocate professional development funds; reestablishment of summer institutes; and high standards for mentor teachers.

NSDC also developed standards to guide the implementation of high quality professional development. The standards were organized into three categories; context, process, and content. Context includes the organization of adults into learning communities, requires school and district leaders to guide instructional improvement, and requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration. Process is data-driven, guided by assessment and evaluation, designed in support of learning strategies and learning theory, and is both research-based and collaborative. Content standards promote equity and diversity; deepen content knowledge leading to quality teaching; and support family involvement. Forty states have either adopted, adapted, or endorsed the NSDC standards for professional development (Wei, et. al., 2009).

The NSDC suggested professional development is more effective when it is not approached in isolation. Single day workshops, sometimes referred to as “hit and run” or “flavor of the month,” are no longer meeting the needs of teachers, schools, and districts seeking significant change and continuous improvement (Easton, 2008; Fullan, 2008; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2007; NSDC, 2009) because they do not provide the long-term and collaborative efforts associated with high quality professional development (Gusky & Yoon,
Professional Development in the New Millennium

Professional development is an inclusive term that encompasses among others: teacher training, workshops, in-service, and continuing education. The way individuals, organizations, and policies use and define these terms varies. Learning Forward, previously the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) defined professional development as, “A comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers’ and principals’ effectiveness in raising student achievement” (Learning Forward, 2011). The emphasis in this definition, which was formalized in the 2001 reauthorization of NCLB, is on the teachers’ ability to help students increase their performance on achievement tests. Emphasis has shifted from teachers’ professional growth to their accountability for student achievement (McLaughlin, 2011). Still, with student outcomes as an important facet, Guskey (2002) broadened the term to describe professional development as a systematic effort to bring about change in teaching practices, teachers’ attitudes and beliefs, and student learning outcomes. Guskey (2002) included the aspect of change in teachers’ beliefs and attitudes about their work.

Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2007), summarized professional development as any experience that enlarges a teacher’s knowledge, appreciation, skills, and understanding of his or her work. Student outcomes are not stated but implied. As Guskey (2002) noted, for the vast majority of teachers, becoming a better teacher means enhancing student learning outcomes and what attracts them to professional development is the belief they will grow, expand their knowledge, and be more effective with their students.
Professional development as it is experienced today by educators is mostly unfocused, insufficient, and irrelevant to the everyday activities of people in schools, leaving teachers’ skills and knowledge unchanged (Lieberman & Wood, 2001; Richardson, 2003; Sparks, 2002). Hargreaves (2007) argued there are five major flaws in professional development programs: presentism which is focused on short-term goals like raising test-scores and long-term planning is viewed as a luxury; authoritarianism when professional learning is delivered not developed and those in charge know what is best; commercialism when outside text-book companies and other paid businesses drive curriculum change and learning; evangelism when deficiencies are defined broadly, everyone feels inadequate, and a “guru” promises the answer to fix all the problems; and narcissism when “style outstrips substance” (p. 38). Hargreaves (2007) insisted professional development will be at its best when it includes integrity, equity, innovation, and interdependence.

Sparks (2002), advocated for professional development to move beyond the transmission of knowledge and to include analytic and reflective processes. He suggested five key components for effective professional development: focus on deepened content knowledge and pedagogical skills; include opportunities for practice, research and reflection; embed the professional development in the workplace and during the workday; sustain the efforts over time; and ground it in collegiality and collaboration (Sparks, 2002, p. 17).

Guskey (1986, 2002) suggested many professional development programs fail because they do not consider two crucial factors: what motivates teacher participation in professional development; and the change process in teachers. Therefore, Guskey (2002) developed The Model for Teacher Change which outlines three principles for effective professional development: recognize change is a gradual and difficult process for teachers; ensure that
teachers receive regular feedback on student progress; and provide continued follow-up, support, and pressure.

Birman, et. al. (2000) also asserted that much of the professional development being offered to teachers does not adequately meet the needs of the reform movement. They conducted a study of 1,000 teachers who participated in the federal government’s Eisenhower Professional Development Program, and explored more than 15 case studies in five states. In their study, they named six characteristics believed to be indicative of success in professional development; three “structural” features, and three “core” features. The structural features included: form, or the activity structure; duration, or the number of hours and over what amount of time the activities took place; and participation, or in what type of group or group composition the teachers participated. The core features included content focus, or the degree to which the activity focused on deepened understanding; active learning, or how and to what extent the teachers were able to participate in active learning; and coherence, or the extent to which continued communication was encouraged, the alignment with standards and school improvement efforts (Birman, et. al., p. 29).

Desimone, et. al. (2002) also published a longitudinal study on the effect of professional development on teaching practice. They suggested a “professional consensus” is emerging about the characteristics of high quality professional development. These characteristics include: focus on content and how students learn content; in-depth, active learning opportunities; links to high standards; opportunities for teachers to engage in leadership roles; extended duration; and the collective participation of groups of teachers from the same school, grade, or department (Desimone, et.al., p. 22).
In their text on instructional leadership, Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2007) synthesized the literature to list 10 components of effective professional development: involvement of participants in the planning and implementation process; integration of school wide, group and individual goals; long-range planning and development; incorporation of research and best practice; administrative support in the form of time and resources; adherence to adult learning principles; attention to research on change; follow up for transfer of learning; ongoing assessment and feedback; continuous improvement as part of school culture.

In the 1990’s, a link was established between school improvement and staff development. Leading reformers Ann Lieberman, Linda-Darling-Hammond, and Milbey McLaughlin began to examine professional development and call for new approaches (Sparks & Hirsch, 1997). Lieberman recognized the same changes being called for in student instruction were being denied to teachers as students, such as wide array of opportunity, increased creative approaches, and engaging learning activities. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin sought professional development that would prepare teachers for diverse learners and reflective practice and critical pedagogy (Sparks & Hirsch, 1997).

**Collaboration and Collegiality**

Education is a social activity, involving communication between individuals who seek to gain mutual understanding to meet the needs of individuals and groups (Cranton, 1996). “Professional learning communities [PLCs] or communities of practice are the terms often given to schools in which staff members provide meaningful and sustained assistance to one another to improve teaching and student learning” (Sparks, 2002). Collaborative and collegial groups are gaining support as effective models for professional development. PLCs consist of teachers from the same school, grade, department, or interest who work together to address a common inquiry
or concern. Several leaders in the field advocate for collaboration in professional development, and found that collaborative activities were an effective method of professional development to improve teacher efficacy (Colbert, et. al., 2008; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Eaker, Dufour, & Dufour, 2008; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2007; Guskey, & Yoon, 2009; McLaughlin, 2011).

Borko (2004) and McLaughlin (2011) suggested that strong PLCs, provide ongoing professional development through collaboration rooted in students’ work, and lead to instructional improvement.

Research on teacher learning communities typically explores features of professional development programs such as the establishment and maintenance of communication norms and trust, as well as the collaborative interactions that occur when groups of teachers work together to examine and improve their practice (Borko, 2004).

Wenger (2006), a social learning theorist, recognized that when people share a common concern or interest for something, they can be characterized by their connection and drive to interact regularly in order to improve their practice. Wenger (2006) referred to the phenomenon as a community of practice. “Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor” (Wenger, 2006, Communities of Practice section, para. 1). According to Wenger (2006), in the context of educational institutions, changing the learning theory is a much deeper transformation than in business and other types of organizations, and it can influence educational practices along three dimensions: internally as in how to organize educational experiences that ground learning; externally in connecting student experiences to practice beyond the walls of the classroom and
into the community; and over the lifetime of the students in serving their lifelong needs and interests beyond formal schooling.

Collaboration requires more than simply bringing teachers together in a group, and therefore more work is needed to determine how to form and support teacher learning communities (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Eaker, DuFour, and DuFour (2002) insisted schools that function as PLC’s are characterized by a collaborative culture. Teachers do not operate as isolated entities each behind a closed door, but collaboration is deeply embedded in the school culture. Colbert et. al. (2008) also synthesized the literature and found that professional learning communities that foster growth and leadership also embrace collaboration as a key component of successful professional development

**Adults as Learners**

All teachers are adults, and as participants in professional development, they are students or learners. According to Peery (2004) adult learning theory, or andragogy, is an important part of any discussion about the professional development of teachers. Seminal work in the field of andragogy was by Malcom Knowles who is credited with popularizing the term. Knowles (1980) made these four assumptions about individuals as they mature: their self-concept moves from dependent toward self-directed; they accumulate a growing bank of experiences that become helpful in the learning process; their readiness to learn becomes related to the tasks of their social roles; and their perspective on learning is more time oriented, shifting from subject-centered to performance-centered (Knowles, 1980). In particular, Knowles (1980) pointed out the implications of the greater volume of experiences had by adults, stating that these experiences have three consequences for learning: adults have more to contribute to the learning of others; adults have a richer foundation of experience to integrate and relate new experiences; and adults
have more ingrained habits and beliefs that make them less open-minded. Peery (2004) stated, for teachers participating in professional development, the theory of andragogy implies growth process is more important than knowledge or content transmission. Active involvement in the learning process and participation in real world problem-solving provide the most effective opportunities for this type of learning (Knowles, 1980; Mizell, 2008; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Therefore, the length and intensity of professional development can be factors that influence the effect of the experience.

Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) suggested active participation and learning opportunities help teachers transform their teaching. The rigor and richness the teachers experience themselves, becomes a model for providing similar experiences for their students. This type of transformative learning applies the assumptions of andragogy as stated by Knowles (1980). Adults have more experience, therefore they have more to offer to others in the learning situation, and they have a richer foundation of experiences to integrate in the learning situation. Erschler (2001) used this premise to guide her methodology of using teacher narratives to learn from school experiences. She concluded that when teachers have the opportunity to learn from their classroom experiences, the experience provides the most powerful context for their learning.

Mezirow (1996) distinguished between knowledge transmission and transformative learning. He described transformative learning as the interaction of previous experiences with new ones to create change in the individual. “Transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference- sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) - to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58). Like Knowles (1980), Mezirow (1996)
recognized the learner brings a previously existing interpretation and has a new experience that guides a new or revised interpretation.

Another assumption of andragogy is adults have increased readiness to learn when they can relate the learning immediately to their personal or professional lives. Adults need a reason for learning something (Knowles, 1984). Hargreaves (1995) argued for concentration of social motivation and commitment, stemming from personal meaning and understandings that each individual teacher brings to teaching.

**Teacher Choice**

According to Moustakas (1995), “Any education concerned with what is essential and enduring learning, recognizes the imperative of self-directed values and processes” (p.125). Marczely (1996) suggested concern for the individual is lacking in current professional development planning. Further Marczely (1996) explained, the central focus of professional development must begin with the individual teacher and his or her experiences, but relate back to the learning process and student achievement. In other words, the individual does not supersede the school, but his or her needs and goals are intertwined (Guskey, 1995; Marczely, 1996). Again, Knowles (1984) recognized that adult learning is intrinsically motivated. Teachers need to determine what questions they need answered about their students’ learning and their own teaching (Bybee & Loucks-Horsley, 2000) and seek to find answers through appropriate professional development opportunities. Higher motivation is likely to be linked to self-selected goals (Knowles, 1984; Loucks-Horsley, 2003; Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1989).

All teachers are required to participate in some professional development activities. However, according to Colbert et. al. (2008) teachers are not usually involved in selecting and planning those activities:
The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), as it relates to professional development, has created a professional development system that does not allow teachers to utilize their professional judgment to determine their own professional development needs or make decisions regarding what professional growth activities are relevant to their classrooms (Colbert et. al., 2008, p. 136-7).

Instead they submitted professional development exists in two tiers. The first is establishing professional learning communities, and the second is focused on mandates and scripted teaching. Colbert et. al. (2008) conducted a phenomenological research study to explore the lived experiences of teachers who had participated in the Collea Teacher Achievement Award Program (CTAAP). CTAAP is grounded in the current literature on professional development, and a collaborative group of teachers is awarded a large sum of money to direct their own professional development experience. “The power of the CTAAP model is that it provides teachers with the autonomy to define the objectives, establish professional networks, and identify and utilize strategies that improve pedagogy and student learning” (Colbert, et. al., 139). The results reported from this study suggest that teachers are capable of developing their own growth plans to affect student learning, and when they are empowered to make decisions about their own professional development, their passion for teaching and improving the lives of their students is enhanced (Colbert, et. al., 2008).

The National Writing Project

The NWP was founded in 1974 at the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. It was born out of the Bay Area Writing Project by John Gray, a teacher educator and former high school English teacher, along with several of his colleagues. The purpose was to create professional development experience grounded in the knowledge,
leadership, and best practices of classroom teachers. At the core, they promoted a sharing of this knowledge (NWP.org). “The structure of this first writing project site’s programs formed the basis of NWP’s ‘teachers-teaching-teachers’ model of professional development” (NWP.org, History of NWP section, para. 3).

Unique in breadth and scale, the NWP is a network of sites anchored at colleges and universities and serving teachers across disciplines and at all levels, early childhood through university. We provide professional development, develop resources, generate research, and act on knowledge to improve the teaching of writing and learning in schools and communities. (NWP.org, About NWP section, para. 3)

One of the most successful teacher networks (Wei, et. al., 2009), NWP supports the belief that professional development of teachers is a pivotal component of school reform, and the voices of teachers are critical to the success of this type of work (Simmons, 2004). Since its inception, the NWP has developed an alternative approach to professional development of teachers.

Rather than conceptualizing teaching as a set of techniques, the NWP builds on the notion that teaching demands a continuous cycle of learning, trial, and evaluation. Rather than providing preset answers to generic problems, the NWP asks teachers to articulate their own dilemmas and pursue means to resolve them. (Lieberman & Wood, 2001, p.175)

The idea that teachers are encouraged to use their classrooms and their teaching environment to generate their own “problems” or voice their own concerns, and then identify ways to resolve them through inquiry and collaboration, align with the principles of adult learning theory. As
Knowles (1984) suggested, adults need a reason to learn something; they are intrinsically motivated. The NWP guides teachers to inquire about what matters to them in their practice.

While the NWP provides a context rich in exploring outside resources, it is especially supportive of the inside knowledge that teachers bring from the field to collaborate with one another. The NWP creates a network of local and regional sites to address concerns relevant to those communities. Addressing professional development with a networking approach, with the teachers as “primary actors” in their own development is gaining significance. Educational reform networks allow teachers to commit to things that have intrinsic interest to them and come naturally out of their work with their students. In addition to formal learning, participants build collegial communities, find power in their voices, and learn to develop leadership skills among their peers (Lieberman & Wood, 2001). The network formed through NWP is a community of practice (Wenger, 2006) in which teachers are drawn together by their passion for writing and improving the teaching of writing. Though not always within the same school or school district, NWP networks form nontraditional PLCs to make their work public, critique each other’s writing, support risk-taking, conduct inquiry, and collaborate about teaching methods and pedagogy.

Lieberman & Wood (2002) spent several years observing the practices of the NWP and described social practices they saw. The teachers, they said, “Surrendered reliance on routine and conventional teaching approaches in order to continuously search for better ways to meet students’ needs, and they saw themselves as conducting this search not only as individuals but also as members of a professional community” (Lieberman & Wood, 2002, p.21). Nine studies of individual NWP sites were summarized in a 2008 NWP research brief. The key findings were that in every measured attribute of writing, students whose teachers participated in NWP
professional development out-performed students whose teachers had not participated (NWP, 2008). The NWP’s Invitational Summer Institute provided a foundation for ongoing learning through conferences, newsletters, and additional workshops; creating opportunity for continuous engagement within their schools and across the profession (Lieberman & Wood, 2002).
In this phenomenological inquiry, I explored the lived experiences of teacher participants in the Invitational Summer Institute of the National Writing Project. I collected data through face-to-face focus groups and personal narratives. Focus group discussions began with the primary research question and through the iterative process of listening, reading, and reflecting during and between the interviews and narrative readings, I asked additional questions based on themes that surfaced. I recorded all sessions, and read the transcripts of the interviews and the narratives. I used the highlighting method to identify emerging themes in the transcripts. After writing a narrative in the attempt to capture the essence of the participants’ experiences, I used member-checking to ask: Is this really what the experience was like for participants?

Participants

The sample for this study was purposive, as participants all had the specific characteristic of experiencing the ISI of the NWP. All those solicited and invited to participate experienced the phenomenon at the heart of the study. Every attempt was made to make the group as heterogeneous as possible in demographic and professional characteristics within the sample collection (Creswell, 2007). The addition of participation options via phone interviews and personal narrative submissions were added since the pilot study, in attempt to increase the sample size. However, the sample size may be considered small, because qualitative phenomenological research relies on the personal experiences and interaction of the individuals participating in the study (Polkinghorne, 2005). The goal of phenomenological research is enriching the understanding of the experience. Therefore I was not as concerned with how many
sources from which the data came, but the richness it provided in bringing understanding of the experience (Polkinghorne, 2005; Merriem, 2002). Rather than legitimizing the data, triangulation serves the purpose of bringing multiple perspectives to deepen the understanding of the shared experience (Polkinghorne, 2005).

Participants were solicited from three NWP network sites: Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU), University of South Florida (USF), and Florida State University (FSU). Initial recruitment was accomplished by sending a letter of invitation to voluntarily participate (Appendix A), and a basic questionnaire (Appendix B) to TCs via email through the individual NWP network site directors. I contacted interested participants by email with an invitation to attend a focus group session, participate in a phone interview, or submit a personal narrative. I made multiple attempts to contact members of the NWP from FSU, but the site is no longer active and I made limited contact, speaking directly with only two members from the site. One TC, now living out of state, agreed to participate via personal narrative. After receipt of his signed, informed consent and the TC questionnaire, I sent him the interview protocol and he returned a brief personal narrative consisting mostly of an explanation of the IS events. The narrative did not contain information to further inform the study, and was therefore left out of the analysis.

Several TCs from NWP at USF responded to my request for participation. One, a doctoral student, explained that she was too busy to meet in a focus group, but she agreed to send a personal narrative. However, she never returned the signed informed consent. I made several attempts to contact her through email, but she did not respond. Three additional members of the USF site agreed to participate in a focus group. I needed at least four participants for a viable focus group, and continued to try and solicit an additional member from USF. I was
unsuccessful, and asked if any of the three TCs would be willing to submit a personal narrative. I never received signed, informed consent from any of them.

Participants were all Teacher Consultants (TCs) of the NWP at FGCU. I made a concerted effort to include participants from as many of the representative counties served by the NWP sites, with the intention of including teachers working in rural, urban, and suburban schools. Though the large majority of TCs in NWP are female, effort was made to include male participants in proportion to membership. As noted, only one male TC responded to the request for participants. It was also my intention to include participants of varied ethnicity as well as varied years of experience in the teaching field.

Nine participants, split into two focus groups agreed to participate face-to-face. Through email and phone contact; I scheduled meeting times for focus groups. At the onset of the initial meeting of each group, I reviewed the informed consent, and participants signed prior to any data collection. I forwarded the consent form to the participant who volunteered to submit a written narrative and she returned it by mail prior to receiving the protocol. Once I received the consent form I emailed the protocol and request for the narrative.

Participants’ names and personal information are not used in the published study. Informed consent, surveys, recordings, and transcripts have been stored in a locked cabinet in the College of Education on the FGCU campus and in the home office of the researcher in a locked cabinet. As researcher, I have had sole access to the research data.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group B Participants</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Teaching Assignment</th>
<th>Years Teaching</th>
<th>Year of ISI Attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Exceptional Student Education Staffing Specialist</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>White/Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>4th Grade Teacher</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3</td>
<td>White/Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>Elementary School Media Specialist</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4</td>
<td>White/Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>Alternative Middle School Language Arts</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B5</td>
<td>White/Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>Gifted Middle School Language Arts</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows the demographics of the participants in Focus group B. Participants included four teachers from Lee County Public Schools and one from Collier County Public Schools. One participant was an elementary school media specialist; one was a district Exceptional Student Education staffing specialist for all levels, one was a general education fourth grade teacher, one was a middle school language arts teacher in an alternative school, and one was a middle school language arts teacher for advanced and gifted students. Years in the teaching profession ranged from five to 34, and one participant attended the ISI in 2005, one attended in 2008, and three attended in 2010. One of the TCs returned as a facilitator during the ISI in 2012.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group B Participants</th>
<th>School Setting District</th>
<th>Title I</th>
<th>Students with Disabilities</th>
<th>English Language Learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>Rural, Suburban, Lee</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Suburban- Lee</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3</td>
<td>Suburban- Lee</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4</td>
<td>Suburban- Lee</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B5</td>
<td>Small Urban- Collier</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows the demographics of the participants’ schools and students. Two of the teachers identified their schools as suburban, one teacher identified her school as small urban, the alternative school teacher described her school as both suburban and rural, and the staffing specialist was assigned to both urban and rural schools. Three of the teachers work in schools identified as Title I schools. With the exception of one teacher, they all work with students with disabilities who have individualized education plans (IEPs), and students identified as English Language Learners (ELLs).

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group C Participants</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Teaching Assignment</th>
<th>Years Teaching</th>
<th>Year of ISI Attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>White/Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>College of Education Instructor</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>White/Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>College of Education Instructor</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>White/Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>College of Arts and Sciences Instructor</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>White/Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>Private High School English Teacher</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 shows the demographics of the participants in Focus group C. Participants included one teacher from a private Parochial School in Lee County, and three college instructors from Florida Gulf Coast University. One participant was a high school English teacher and yearbook advisor; one was an English composition and professional writing instructor in the College of Arts and Sciences at FGCU, and two were instructors in the College of Education at FGCU.

Years in the teaching profession ranged from seven to 42, and one participant attended the ISI in 2000, one attended in 2008, and two attended in 2010. One of the TCs has been coordinating the ISI at FGCU for the last five years.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group C Participants</th>
<th>School Setting</th>
<th>Students with Disabilities</th>
<th>English Language Learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Suburban College Campus</td>
<td>Not identified</td>
<td>Not identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Suburban College Campus</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>Suburban College Campus</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>Suburban Parochial School</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows the demographics of the schools in which Focus Group C work, and the students with whom the participants work. Three of the teachers work on a suburban college campus, and the fourth works in a suburban parochial high school. Three of them work with students with disabilities who have IEPs, and three of them work with students identified as ELL.
Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify the shared feelings and experiences of a group of teachers who voluntarily participated in a unique professional development program, the ISI of the National Writing Project. Further, the study explored how these common experiences may have led to paradigm shifts or change in the teachers’ classroom practice.

The study was guided by the research question: **What is the lived experience of participants in the Invitational Summer Institute of the National Writing Project?** Additional questions for consideration are:

a. In what ways does the experience of the ISI influence teacher perception of self-efficacy?

b. In what ways does the experience of the ISI influence teacher perceptions of practice?

c. In what ways does the participants’ perception of the influence of the ISI change over time?

I facilitated discussions in an attempt to capture the shared lived experience of the NWP Summer Institute. Phenomenology is in search of understanding of what something is really like and the researcher must always be mindful of the original question (van Manen, 1990). According to van Manen (1990), phenomenological questions are meaning questions that ask for significance of certain phenomena. The questions are asked with the purpose of gleaning insight to the lived experience of the subjects, and in this case concerns the meaning of pedagogy (van Manen, 1990). Though the researcher is always guided by the original question, the question is a window to the lived experience and continues to generate additional questions. Creswell (2003)
recommended the qualitative researcher ask one or two central questions with no more than five to seven follow-up questions because "qualitative research is emergent rather than tightly prefigured" (p. 181). Therefore, the interviews and narrative consisted of open-ended questions that surface from the initial questions: What was the experience of the Invitational Summer Institute of the National Writing Project like for you? How, if at all, have you changed as a result of the experience? This protocol was the basis for focus group discussions and the personal narrative.

**Research Design**

The method for this study was phenomenology, as human experience is a difficult area to study because of its complexity; experiences are not rigidly ordered, nor do they occur according to mathematical patterns (Polkinghorne, 2005; van Manen, 1990). Qualitative methods consider specific and particular characteristics of human experience in order to facilitate the investigation of the experience (Polkinghorne, 2005). Creswell (2007) asserted we conduct qualitative research to empower the participants to share their stories, and deemphasize the power relationship between the researcher and the participants. According to van Manen (1990), when adopting one research approach over another, the method chosen ought to be in harmony with the deep interest that makes one an educator in the first place. Phenomenology seeks meaning-making of human experience (Patton, 2002). Further, van Manen (1990) posited that one comes to the human sciences with an interest, and so when the researcher raises questions, collects data, and attempts to describe phenomena, she does so as a researcher who stands “in the world in a pedagogic way” (van Manen, 1990, p.1). While the examination of student achievement would explore some of the affect teachers have had on their students, it would not isolate the meaning of the experience these teachers shared and how it changed their classroom and teaching.
behaviors, or their lives. Instead of “pulverizing life into minute abstracted fragments and particles,” phenomenological research allows the researcher to sit among the participants and describe the emerging themes that link the shared experience, “thus maintaining a view of pedagogy as an expression of the whole, and a view of the experiential situation as the topos of real pedagogic acting” (van Manen, 1990, p. 7). The quantitative data may suggest that it, whatever it is, is working; the qualitative may provide insight as to why it is working.

By its very nature, phenomenology is retrospective; it is a reflection of an experience that the participants have already lived through (van Manen, 1990). Florida Educator Accomplished Practices (FEAPs), set forth by the Florida Department of Education, include the task of engaging in “targeted professional growth opportunities and reflective practices.” Teachers need to reflect on issues and contexts that may affect the core of their practice (Sparks, 2002; Sparks & Hirsch, 1997; Schön, 1983). Phenomenology extends the opportunity for teachers to personally and professionally reflect on their practice while providing interested members of the field with data to examine what common experiences, or contexts may have affected the core of their practice. This data then will inform those who seek to provide meaningful professional development experiences for teachers. Consideration of various perspectives is one of the goals of phenomenological research, but according to van Manen (1990), the deeper goal of this type of research is to understand the phenomenon as a human experience. The methodology is distinguished by the recognition of the force of the essential question (van Manen, 1990).

**Data Collection**

Researchers of phenomenology focus on describing the participants’ common experience of the specific phenomenon. Descriptions can encompass everything from thoughts and emotions to examples of the physical; and these descriptions are the qualitative data (Cresswell, 2007).
The term data is used to describe the accounts gathered by qualitative researchers; with the understanding it does not have the same connotation here as it does in quantitative research. Quantitative researchers see the data as independent of those who gathered it; qualitative data are a product of the interaction between participant and researcher (Polkinghorne, 2005). The purpose of this data collection was to provide evidence for the experience being investigated and was analyzed to produce a “core description” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 138).

I sent a letter of request to participate to TCs of the National Writing Project at several network sites via email. Attached to the letter was a brief questionnaire asking for demographic information, contact information, and availability for focus group sessions or interest in narrative submissions. Request to participate was sent within one week requesting a time available for a scheduling conference.

Each participant of the study signed Informed Consent, prior to the first interview session or narrative submission. Two focus groups, one of five teachers and one of four teachers, participated in discussion/interview sessions ranging from one to two hours each, and were recorded. According to Polkinghorne (2005), one one-hour session is not sufficient for obtaining the rich descriptions needed for worthwhile findings. Focus group meetings were scheduled as recommended by Seidman (1991) and Polkinghorne (2005):

- The first session was used to become acquainted, establish rapport, review the informed consent, and to review the research questions giving participants time to consider and explore the research topic. This allowed participants time to think more deeply about the experience before the subsequent sessions.
- The second discussion was more focused and allowed exploration of the shared lived experience.
• In the third interview, I asked follow-up questions for clarity, and the participants continued to share any additional information.

• Individual follow-up, or member-checking, occurred with the participants as I shared the transcripts in order to accurately represent each person’s experiences.

The first meeting of Focus Group B consisted of consent to participate and an introduction to the purpose of the study. In session two, I asked the primary question for the participants to answer openly with no specific format or structure. They spoke freely, regulating their own turn-taking interactive response. I asked follow-up questions for clarification and to address recurring themes in the discussion. In the final session we addressed themes from the previous session’s transcripts and any additional comments participants wanted to share to further inform the study.

The first meeting of Focus Group C consisted of consent to participate and an introduction to the purpose of the study via electronic communication. The second session was a face-to-face group meeting, in which I followed the same protocol as I did with the Focus Group B. I asked the primary question for the participants to answer openly with no specific format or structure. They spoke freely, regulating their own turn-taking interactive response. I asked follow-up questions for clarification, and to address recurring themes in the discussion. This group did not meet for a third session. I addressed themes from the transcripts and any additional comments participants wanted to share to further inform the study through email and phone communication.

The teacher, who chose to submit a narrative in lieu of participation in the focus group sessions, wrote a personal narrative in response to the same questions in the interview protocol. The participant sent her writing to me, and I coded it with the focus group and interview transcripts. While the data collection during focus groups and phone interviews consisted
primarily of audio recordings, I also took written notes of any nonverbal cues such as body language, facial expressions, and interaction among participants. Recordings from the focus groups were professionally transcribed, and I coded for common themes, using the highlighting approach (vanManen, 1990) and looking for clusters of meaning (Hycner, 1985). Participants read the transcripts to verify the findings and make clarifications, and feedback was used to write the final report.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Data as collected in the hard sciences is seen as objective, and separate from those who produce and collect it. In phenomenology however, the researcher seeks to describe the lived experience. The data, or the description by the participants of the experience, cannot be separated from the experience itself. Therefore, by its very nature, phenomenological data collection is both interpretive and transformative (van Manen, 1990). According to Polkinghorne (2005), the research process is an iterative one that continues to move from collection of data to analysis and back until there is a comprehensive description of the phenomenon. The methodology for the focus groups as outlined, allowed for this interpretive and analytical process to begin during and between the interviews. Building on data between the interviews, the phenomenologist has the opportunity to review transcripts and highlight significant statements (Creswell, 2007). The statements are then used to develop essences (Moustakas, 1994), themes (van Manen, 1990), or clusters of meaning (Hycner, 1985; Creswell, 2007).

The purpose of the study was to capture what about the ISI may have influenced the participants and led to some sort of transformation, thus recurring themes in the literature on transformative learning were expected to emerge. However, as phenomenology is not prefigured, and seeks to describe the experience shared by the participants, additional themes were expected
to emerge and were explored further as the discussions progressed. These emerging themes were also revisited in the subsequent sessions or in follow up communication during member-checking.

Once these themes were recognized, I used them to describe the lived experience of the participants. However, van Manen (1990) suggested a thematic phrase cannot capture the richness of the life phenomenon, it serves only “to point at, to allude to, or to hint at, an aspect of the phenomenon” (p. 92). I used the selective or highlighting approach as described by van Manen (1990) to identify phrases that stood out in the interview transcripts, and seemed to be thematic of the experience of the Invitational Summer Institute (pp.93-94). I used these themes in follow-up conversations, to reflect back on the original phenomenological question in the iterative process described by Polkinghorne (2005). As van Manen (1990) suggested, the appropriateness of the themes were considered by asking “Is this what the experience is really like?” (p.99). Finally, I used the themes to create a text which describes the phenomenon as shared by the participants.
Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

**Trustworthiness.** There are multiple voices and discourses at work in qualitative research, leading to various perspectives on the importance of its validity (Creswell, 2007). However, it is generally acknowledged in the literature that trustworthiness of the data depends on the integrity and honesty of the research and the researcher. Discussions of trustworthiness in phenomenology (Creswell, 2007; Morrow, 2005) usually reference four criteria proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility of this study was established through the use of reputable research methods. Creswell (2007) asserted that validity is a strength of qualitative research, and suggests implementing any of eight primary strategies, four of were used to conduct this research:

- **Triangulation** was be achieved by collecting data from more than one focus group, each consisting of at least 5 participants, to uncover common themes.
- **Member checking** was used to follow up with the participants to determine the accuracy of the findings as the themes are revealed and the narrative description is developed.
- **Researcher bias** was clarified by bracketing out personal experience (Cresswell, 2007; van Manen, 1990) through narrative reflection prior to completing the research.
- **Rich, thick description** was used to communicate the findings, in order to help give the reader a sense of the setting and the shared experience.

Transferability may be difficult to establish with a small sample size, however the sample must be relatively small to capture the essence of the experienced phenomena. Shenton (2004) cautions that researchers can easily become preoccupied with transferability, but the results of the study need to be understood in the context of the specific characteristics of the setting.
Similar projects, with the same methods in different environments can help to assess whether or not the results are transferable. This study was conducted to repeat and expand on a pilot study which asked the same primary research question of two focus groups comprised of TCs from one NWP site (Kemp, 2011, unpublished). Inclusion of additional TCs from strengthened and gleaned new understanding of the data, providing greater triangulation.

Dependability is the researcher’s ability to produce reliable results. It addresses whether or not the study can be repeated in the same context with the same methods, and yield similar results. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), there is a close relationship between credibility and dependability, and by adhering to credible methods dependability begins to be established. Additionally, detailed documentation of the methodology in order to create a prototype, addresses the credibility of the study more directly. These details provide the reader with a view into the research practice and the use of appropriate methods.

Confirmability refers to “the qualitative investigator’s comparable concern to objectivity” (Shenton, 2004, p. 73). The researcher must be sure to collect and report the experiences and the issues of the participants and not her own preferences and characteristics. This was addressed through triangulation, bracketing, and the researcher’s disclosure of her connection to the National Writing Project and the experiences of the participants.

The universal character given to phenomenological research is in the possibility that one person’s lived experience can be shared by others, making it a human experience (van Manen, 1990). “It is to the extent that my experiences could be our experiences that the phenomenologist wants to be reflectively aware of certain experiential meanings” (van Manen, 1990, p.57). Cresswell (2007) and van Manen (1990) suggested, while conducting phenomenology, the researcher describe her own experiences first to "bracket" out her thoughts.
and views before describing others' experiences. Further, van Manen (1990) suggested a direct
description of the experience in experiential terms, without causal explanations or interpretive
generalizations. As a member of the National Writing Project who participated in one of the
Invitational Summer Institutes, I provided a reflective narrative of my experiences prior to
conducting the interviews and reading or coding the data. Free of interpretive language, this
bracketing was written as non-interpretive recollection.

**Limitations and Delimitations.** Discussion of the study’s limitations recognizes the
researcher has realistic perspective on the generalizability and conclusiveness of the findings
(Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The sample size of this study, though within the recommended
range of 5 to 25 (Polkinghorne, 1989) for phenomenological research, was relatively small. As a
result there are limits to how broadly the findings can be generalized. However, this study,
repeated with several focus groups of NWP Teacher Consultants from sites across the country,
can serve to further inform the research. Similar repeated studies are recommended for this
purpose.

The interviews were collected and coded by an individual researcher, and were
professionally transcribed. The researcher, as a Teacher Consultant of the National Writing
Project, may serve as both strength and threat to the validity of the study. Having experienced the
phenomenon, I could be a participant in the study. However, as recommended by
phenomenologists, I bracketed out my personal experience in descriptive terms (Creswell, 2007;
Moustakas, 1994; van Mannen, 1990) prior to the focus group interviews. One approaches an
experience with a certain interest (van Manen, 1990), and this pedagogic interest in the question
being asked is what orients this researcher to the phenomenon. Van Manen (1990) suggested, “In
drawing up personal descriptions of lived experiences, the phenomenologist knows that one’s
own experiences are also the possible experiences of others” (p. 54). This notion oriented me and drove my purpose for the study; however, I am committed to collecting and revealing untainted data to contribute useful and valid findings to the field of professional development.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Bracketing of the Researcher’s Experience

Moustakas (1994) stated, “In a phenomenological investigation, the researcher has a personal interest in what she or he seeks to know; the researcher is intimately connected with the phenomenon” (p. 59). In qualitative research, the extent to which the researcher is connected to the experience captured in the study raises concern with respect to the credibility of the study (Bednall, 2006). A researcher can become consciously aware of his or her suppositions and how they might influence the outcome of the study, by bracketing (Husserl 1999; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990; Gearing, 2004). Bracketing is the process in which a researcher, “Suspends or holds in abeyance his or her presuppositions, biases, assumptions, theories, or previous experiences to see and describe the phenomenon” (Gearing, 2004, p.3). As the researcher who has shared the lived experience of the phenomenon, I have written this narrative to serve three purposes:

1. To provide context to the descriptions of the participants.
2. To acknowledge my connection to the phenomenon.
3. To set aside my own experiences and feelings before I begin interaction with the participants.

In the spring term of 2010, I became aware of a professional development opportunity through my university’s chapter of the National Writing Project (NWP). The NWP’s annual Invitational Summer Institute (also referred to in this manuscript as the Summer Institute or ISI) would take place for four weeks in June and July. I was an advanced graduate student with a
cognate in language arts and a love of writing, and I had just completed a course in my studies, in which we explored critical literacies. The Summer Institute seemed to be an effective way to meet some of my program requirements and become involved in a rich, intense professional development experience about reading and writing. I applied and hoped to be selected for one of the limited spots in the ISI class of 2010.

I was accepted into the Invitational Summer Institute along with two members of my graduate school cohort. I was not aware of any other friends or acquaintances I may have had in the National Writing Project at the time, and I did not know any other participants or facilitators of the ISI. I arrived the first day, excited but unaware of the format or schedule, and with only a vague sense of the expectations and outcomes of the program.

The group met daily for four consecutive weeks, Monday through Friday from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm. Most of the activities took place in and around a classroom in the university’s College of Education building; however there were several learning activities around the campus, and there were two field trips. We sat in clusters; tables and chairs were set up in pod-like fashion and seats were not assigned. The attendees included teachers from pre-kindergarten all the way through college, and there was an art teacher, a media specialist, and several content-area teachers. There was also a teacher from a local alternative school.

**Institute Components.** Though the learning activities were varied, the schedule could be characterized by several key components: the invitation to write, the introduction of a research article, the presentation of a demo lesson, and a devoted time to work in a peer writing group.

*Invitation to Write*

The invitation to write was the first activity each morning. One of the facilitators presented a book excerpt, a favorite quote, a magazine or newspaper snip-it, or a multi-media
clip. Each of these facilitators selected invitations which resonated with them as human beings, writers, professionals. After sharing, the facilitator invited the group to write in a journal each of us received on the first day, or in another notebook of personal choice. No criteria, no genre, and no boundaries were given, just a request to write on your own terms in whatever way you were inspired. The writing period was about ten minutes, and upon completion there was a request for the writers to share on a voluntary basis. Often throughout the share time, discussion ensued about personal feelings, reflective practice, individual experiences. The invitation to write was similar to personal journal writing, but at times teachers wrote for an audience knowing they intended to share with the group. Every day of the ISI, even off-site, began with the invitation to write. Somewhere along the way, the name was shortened, in conversation, to the invite to write.

Research Articles

In addition to the journal, on the first day each teacher received a 3-inch binder filled with several resources. One section consisted of a collection of research articles, some of which the facilitators used in the daily sessions. We employed several strategies for reading parts of the articles in small groups and sharing with the whole group. Sometimes the articles led us to immediately apply the concepts and activities in working sessions, and other times we engaged in reflective discussion about our practice.

Demo Lesson

Demo lessons are PowerPoint-led demonstrations of a teaching practice or strategy one of the teachers had successfully implemented in his or her classroom. This is one of the cornerstones of the ISI, as all teacher participants are treated as potential leaders, and are required to create their own demo to be presented to the group at some point during the four weeks. With feedback and practice, we were able to complete the ISI with a demo suitable for
presentation at a professional development program for other teachers, and then become Teacher Consultants (TCs) for the National Writing Project. The first few demos were presented by facilitators, and then daily, each of us presented our demos to the whole group for questions and critique.

*Peer Writing Groups*

Teacher participants came to the Summer Institute with varying types and degrees of writing experience. However, the National Writing Project’s goal is to improve the teaching of writing, and all teachers were expected and encouraged to write every day. During the ISI, each day ended with a peer writing group to which you were assigned on the first day. One facilitator and four or five participants met to share pieces in progress, to ask for and offer feedback, and to work through or celebrate personal writing progress.

*Additional Outcomes*

In addition to the components discussed, throughout the four weeks, ISI participants worked independently to complete three more requirements:

- Each teacher was responsible for the development of a research question to be answered through readings and experiences during the time spent at the Summer Institute. The question was not meant to evolve into a lengthy research paper, but a reflective synthesis on some of the research findings and application of strategies or practices the teacher learned during the institute. The research question was in direct relationship to the teachers’ current practice. For example, my research question was:

  *How can I balance helping my students to develop comfort and love for the writing craft, while also maintaining the principal’s expectations for using the school-wide mandated writing program materials to help them achieve passing scores on the state writing*
assessment? Through this inquiry I worked to negotiate school mandates with constructivist pedagogy and risk-taking.

- One of the core beliefs of the NWP is teachers who write, are better writing teachers.

Another requirement of the ISI was to submit a personal piece of writing for the anthology to be published at the end of the summer. The facilitators asked us to write an autobiographical piece, or a creative piece such as a poem or narrative. These pieces were at the center of the daily peer writing groups. We shared with our groups and solicited feedback in order to revise and edit. My final personal piece was a poem:

*The Forgotten Dance*

I’ve lost my artist’s pen  
It may be buried  
Under my lessons plans,  
My curriculum maps, my students’ work

I think it may be hidden  
Beneath the textbooks,  
The journal articles, the sticky notes

I’ve lost my artist’s pen  
I may have washed it  
Away with the sheets,  
The clothes, the rest of the laundry

I think I caught a glimpse of it  
In the drawer with my creative license,  
My Crayola colors, my Origami paper

I’ve lost my artist’s pen  
I may have spotted it  
Up high on a shelf  
With my photos,  
My journals, my poetry

It calls to me in my dreams  
It stares at me from the shelf  
It begs of me
All of the participants received a copy of a self-selected book from the NWP library. The books were related to topics such as writing and literacy, writing across content areas, and teaching writing to specific groups in the student population. Some of the books were theoretical and others more practical, but each participant chose their own, received a copy, and wrote a book review to share with the whole group.

My ISI Experience. My immersion into the ISI experience was immediate. I found myself unable to wait each day to see or hear what the facilitators would offer to us as an invitation to write. I was excited to spill my reflective thoughts onto the page, and I admit, I was anxious to share my thoughts and my writing with others. I am unsure what the invitation was the first day, but my journal suggests the question of why we were teachers, arose. I rambled on a smattering of all the reasons I could not imagine being anything other than a teacher, and then I wrote:

Perhaps it’s more fitting to ask in this time and place, how am I teacher? How can I do this with so many forces working against me? How can I rise above the criticisms, the bureaucracy, and the stifling policies? How can I be a teacher?

These were my reflections on day one. The floodgates had opened and though the creative genius was not always there, I wrote reflectively every day. I wrote about my feelings, my teaching, and my dreams. I even wrote about my anxieties. On day four I wrote about writing and my inability on that day to express anything I judged to be profound enough to share with the group. I began to write a poem about “showing students the path and not the way.” It was a poem trying to convey the difficulty we have
as teachers to model and then pull back and let students try things on their own. But after two lines, I deflated:

I can’t think today. I’m caught up in what I should be writing, or what I think will be worthy of sharing. I haven’t shared in two days. A creative poem? Not today, I already tried. An insightful anecdote? Not today- I don’t have one. Each day I think, when will it come? When will the masterpiece make its way from head to hand to paper…?

I reflected. I learned to think about how my students felt. I realized that the audience I thought I was writing for was taking precedence over whatever I needed to say. This daily writing exercise helped me grow as a writer, as a teacher.

Current school culture with all of the policies and mandates is focused on research-based practices. One of the components of the ISI I found empowering was the research and teaching-field literature supporting the ideas, strategies, and lessons. This allowed us to affirm what we knew as good teachers, are best practices. When there are experts and teachers using research and inquiry to support what you are doing, as a teacher you feel more empowered to take risks and try new things. This was the aspect of the ISI designed to build leadership, and it worked for me.

The work I did during the Summer Institute, as a continuation of my advanced graduate studies, was intense and rich. The ability to spend the entire day every day, for a whole month, writing, talking about writing, and learning about teaching writing felt hand-tailored for my needs and desires as a person and as a teacher. I had never experienced professional development in this way before. Every person who attended,
was there because they wanted to be, and for the same purpose. We created a community of writers, of thinkers, of teachers, to whom I feel forever connected. As a research student, I recalled the words of van Manen (1990): “In drawing up personal descriptions of lived experiences, the phenomenologist knows that one’s own experiences are also the possible experiences of others” (p. 54). I could not help but wonder; do other ISI participants feel the way I do?

Findings

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to try and capture the experience of the Invitational Summer Institute of the National Writing Project, and to explore in what ways the experience may have impacted their classroom teaching. This chapter will report on the themes revealed in two semi-structured focus groups (Focus Group B and Focus Group C) conducted with ISI participants. The focus group interviews began with one open-ended question: What was the experience of the Invitational Summer Institute of the National Writing Project like for you? Through iterative reading and coding of the interview transcripts, additional questions were raised and addressed in subsequent sessions, and through follow-up member-checking.
**Focus Group B.** Four often overlapping themes emerged from the focus group discussions transcripts. The four themes were: *Sense of Community; Empowerment through Positive Culture; Teachers Teaching Teachers; and Confidence and Professionalism.* Each theme is discussed in this chapter with excerpts of participants’ responses and dialogue during the focus group interviews.

**Theme One: Sense of Community**

Coming away, being full and excited, and really having had a sense of community. For me, it’s a spiritual experience similar to being in church, to be amongst a group of people who are committed to let their inside out. (Participant B4)

The ISI is usually scheduled for two to four weeks. All of the participants in this focus group attended four week Summer Institutes. Each of them expressed at some point during the interviews, the importance of developing a sense of community or family during their time in the ISI. “It gave me a chance to know, and meet some people locally that otherwise, I wouldn’t have known, because I was new to the community” (Participant B3). She continued, “It was nice to know there was a community of people who valued writing” (Participant B3).

You had science teachers, and elementary school, and preschool, and you had a variety of individuals who are coming, all wanting to do writing, not just language arts teachers. You know it wasn’t just going through the motion, it wasn’t just lip service. Community; it built community (Participant B4).

Time commitment and common purpose were expressed as important factors by other participants. “It’s a big commitment to go for that length of time I think, especially if we’re teachers” (Participant B5). Participant B2 paired the commitment to time and purpose to explain
a distinction she made between the ISI and other professional development experiences. “The difference between the Writing Project and [other experiences] was that we wanted to be there. We applied, we filled out an application, we wrote an essay because we wanted to be there and see that change” (Participant B2). Part of what teachers identify as a strength of the ISI is that it develops over a period of time. Spending all day, everyday together for about a month helped to develop the sense of community and the family dynamic.

I think too often, PD [professional development] is one shot wonders. And the fact that it was multiple days, so you had time to build relationships, and you had time to grow, I think is a key piece for what makes the National Writing Project (Participant B3).

According to the participants, the time and depth contributed to the sense of community. “It’s actually thorough,” asserted Participant B2. “It’s not regurgitated information that’s just being handed to you in bits and pieces. In the National Writing Project, they sat with you, they talked with you, you practiced, you came back. You did this for weeks at a time,” (Participant B2). Participant B5 reminisced about pieces she wrote at the ISI and explained how she was changed by the experience. “It was deeply involved. I think the length of it, you know, was a big commitment to do it because everyone’s busy,” she continued to make clear how valuable that time was. The TCs continuously referred to the sense of community as an extension of the time they spent together engaged in a common passion.

But when it changes you internally, and it changes how you teach, and who you are, it’s not one of those six hour workshops, three hour workshops, two-hour work- whatever… this is different. It’s not a piece of paper; it’s a whole change of attitude (Participant B5).
Extended periods of time together led to the development of friendships and community. “Everyone’s learning together,” Participant B2 declared, and “Teachers were meeting collegially as groups” (Participant B4). “It gave me the experience and the support of other people to tell me how I can make things better” (Participant B2). “It was almost like you got a family,” Participant B1 said. “There was the family dynamic because of the time you were spending together” (Participant B1). One of the teachers explained how the “genuineness” of a “real community” was important to her; she expressed her struggle to draw on the strength of the community back in her school:

That’s the mixed blessing of it, is to be in a community that was very supportive and very loving, and then poof you’re out of the nest. I think coming together; the value for me… was that opportunity to express my voice and then trust it (Participant B4).

Several of the participants talked about maintaining these relationships during and after the ISI. “I really enjoyed the experience of the swapping of the minds, and I still correspond with people” (Participant B1). Participant B2 also talked about the connections she made,

I look at the camaraderie that comes with the National Writing Project. I still have people who email me on a regular basis, asking for tips when working with children, or we talk about what I can do to help [my current students] (Participant B2).

Theme Two: Empowerment through Positive Culture

I felt that to have value in the National Writing process, you know on a national perspective, that everybody participates in the democracy, and everybody’s voice is heard, and has value. (Participant B4)
A more pervasive theme that emerged out of the sense of community was the ability of the members of NWP to create a positive environment in that community, where everyone felt safe, and thus had freedom and voice. “I really wasn’t confident that I would be able to teach writing. So I started getting fearful of my skill level or what I have to offer,” said Participant B4. “So you know if I don’t go in there feeling like I have a voice that’s valuable, it makes it harder to teach and empower others… That for me, in the context of the National Writing Project, I got that” (Participant B4). “I love that word empowerment that you use,” another teacher said in response. “Because I think that’s one of the key lynchpins to the National Writing Project, is giving empowerment to teachers, puts them- lets us give empowerment to our students” (Participant B3). Participant B3 also acknowledged, “We were there because we wanted to be. We were there because we saw meaning, in terms of what we thought they were going to do. I think we went in with a different attitude that was probably more positive” (Participant B3). A third teacher described how she felt empowered by her freedom to make choices, in the context of the ISI.

We had to pick what we wanted to work on. It wasn’t anybody telling us you have to do this. It was you pick something you want to research, that you want to get better at. Picking your little piece of what you were really trying to get from it, really, it makes the experience so much better (Participant B2).

There were several ways the participants described feeling empowered. Teachers remarked they found their voices, or validity was given to their voices. One teacher asserted, “The difference in my experience was that they cared about what I said, as opposed to telling me what they had to say” (Participant B1). Another shared, “It’s like, valuing, not the information, valuing you, and how you brought the information. And it was there all the time” (Participant
B5). Much of the empowerment discussion emerged out of one aspect of the ISI; teachers were expected to, and were put into the position to write on a daily basis. This led to remarks on the subjects of putting teachers in the role of their students, and learning about oneself as a writer.

The participants engaged in thoughts about self-doubt and expressed that writing with their peers at the ISI, as their students are expected to do in class, helped build confidence.

“People don’t feel confident about writing. I don’t know how everyone grew up thinking they’re rotten writers, but gee, it really feels like the self-talk I hear amongst teachers and students is how much they feel like they’re bad writers” (Participant B1).

I learned a lot about my own writing. Giving me the background of how to write myself was very helpful with teaching kids to write. I didn’t realize because I struggled with writing I would struggle in teaching it to my kids (Participant B3).

Participant B3 also revealed, “I hated writing until I went to the NWP. The Summer Institute is when I was able to see that, wow, it’s not so hard… and seeing that other people were doing the same thing made me feel more comfortable” (Participant B2). Participant 1 insisted, “We have to walk in their shoes and wake up in their beds.” She recalled a field trip to a swamp during the ISI, where she felt undeniably out of place and uncomfortable. She described herself as having “goofed off,” and confessed:

I [was] acting like one of the kids. A place where I’m uncomfortable writing, I’m blowing off the assignment. Where I’m comfortable, I would flourish and fulfill the assignment as required. When I was uncomfortable, I was kind of acting up (Participant B1).
“When you have to sit there amongst your peers and you have to write, you start questioning yourself, if you’re a good writer or not,” one of the language arts teachers explained. “I think they made it is as comfortable as they possibly could, but when you were called on daily to put yourself out there, you have a little more empathy for your students when you come back into the classroom” (Participant B5). The fourth grade teacher recalled a story she wrote during the ISI; a true story. She was amazed at the positive reaction from her colleagues. She realized,

If I can do this, my kids can do this. And being able to bring that to my classroom, and showing them, you know what? Your teacher can write, and I used that. When they are writing I am writing because I had a sense of how hard it is for them (Participant B2).

Participants also talked about finding their voices and an appreciation for themselves as writers. There was an exchange of memories and thoughts about the culture of safety and acceptance enveloping the ISI. “We were established as a safe zone,” Participant B1 declared. “It did feel very safe, and I think confidence comes from not feeling threatened, not feeling afraid, whether it’s for us as adults or young kids” (Participant B3). Participant 5 added, “I think it’s just an overall feeling to begin with, this is how it was explained. This is going to be a safe place; this is going to be an encouraging place. We’re all going to put ourselves out there” (Participant B5).

Much of the self-exploration in writing was reported by the participants to have been experienced during the invitation to write, the quick-write activity that occurred at the start of each morning during the ISI. One of the teachers recalled her reaction to sharing. “For me it was those quick writes we did,” she described feeling empowered. “Because when I heard mine relative to people that I knew were published, and you know AP writing and blah-blah-blah, I thought well, I mean I can hold my own in that group” (Participant B4).
I think it’s the freedom that they provide, within the structure that is there, to allow you to grow and develop, whatever it is you need to grow and develop, and the positivity that they always expressed. They were always encouraging, which gives you the freedom to try, because you don’t fear what somebody is going to say or do (Participant B3).

Participant I added, “We had to be vulnerable in there. You could express yourself. But you were safe enough that you could. You knew that you weren’t going to get torn apart.” The trust participants felt amongst their colleagues at the ISI seemed to stay with them. It was something they talked about replicating in their classrooms with their students.

I think I grew from that trust at the National Writing Project, because everyone was in the same boat. They were all a little- even if they were great writers- they were all a little timid about writing in front of their peers. There were various levels of experience from still in college to many years. They made you feel confident, and then you tried to project that to your students. Because if you think you can, you will (Participant B5).

The alternative school teacher described strong feelings about the concept of voice. Initially she started the ISI, “With this idea that I’m in way over my head, and then I felt pretty confident as I was doing the writing exercise and sharing my writing. Hey, I can write, I can share” (Participant B4). She discovered that others appreciated her voice, encouraging her to help her students find their voices. “I think coming together, the value for me was that opportunity to express my voice and then trust it, because I could hear how other people are writing and expressing.” Later she added, “Being more confident about my own voice, I was able then to be that with the students” (Participant B4).
All of these thoughts about empowerment and voice came together as the participants seem to reach a group realization expressed by one of the teachers.

I think that is the culture of the National Writing Project. We will be positive. We will deal in positive ways. We will act in positive ways. And so it gives you confidence… and I think it’s an intentional cultural decision that the National Writing Project has made. We will look at it and make it better (Participant B3).

Others continued about the positive approach. “If you can encourage [the students] that they can write, and then that it can always be better and better and better, it was never really wrong to begin with” (Participant B5). “I’m sure that part of the expectation in the setting up of the National Writing Project, is that they want everyone to be better. Whatever better is for you” (Participant B3). “In this place, it’s going to be safe,” Participant 4 said about her classroom.”And if you criticize anyone, then you won’t have the privilege of being in [this] room,” she warned. “It’s the intentionality to me of authentic writing, because it’s their voices” (Participant B4).

Empowered and feeling valued, the participants talked about bringing their voices back to their families, schools and communities.

Usually you come [to professional development activities] and you say oh well, I’m going to take something away. Well at the end of the ISI it was like, I know I can give something back. I can give this to my kids, I can give this to my colleagues, I can give this to myself as a writer (Participant B1).

Whether they were well received or not, they still felt empowered to share their experiences however they could. “From the skills then that I’m able to take back, and the attitudes back into
the classroom, then if I’m the only one in the building, then I’m at least one. And to have that be enough, you know?” (Participant B4) Three of the teachers verbalized that they experienced change. “When you went to the National Writing Project you changed everything,” Participant B2 said about her teaching. “I have changed because I absolutely love writing. It gave me an appreciation for my own writing; it opened up my lesson plans. My whole life has changed” (Participant B2). “The change was us. We were the paradigm shift,” Participant B1 exclaimed.

You don’t have a piece of paper that you can say, okay, I’m going to do this with my students. It was internal, it changed you. And you went through the process, and it was a lengthy process. And you had a final product. But the product was you, and how you came across to your students (Participant B5).

**Theme Three: Teachers Teaching Teachers**

It gives such credibility when you know that the people who are leading it are living your life in a different building, a different grade level maybe, but they’re very much in the trenches as well (Participant B3).

Professional development comes in many forms, but one of the values the participants of the ISI identified was that the Summer Institute was developed by and taught by working teachers. One of the participants asserted, “It’s not someone standing up in front of you telling you, you need to do this, you need to do this, and this is how you have to do it. You have more of that teacher community” (Participant B2). Participants expressed a sense of credibility from facilitators who work in classrooms, “As opposed to somebody who may or may not have seen a child in so long, they’ve forgotten what they look like” (Participant B3). They exchanged glances and chuckled over a comment about the school districts flying in experts, “Who may be very
good at what they do, but they’ve not been in a classroom for a long time” (Participant B3). Participant B4 referred to a “check the box” meeting, in reference to sit-and-listen type meetings, but talked about her desire for meaningful experiences through community building. This theme seemed to overlap with the first theme, Sense of Community. The ISI’s sense of community seemed deeply embedded in the framework of Teachers Teaching Teachers. Learning from peers rather than outsiders seemed to help develop the collaborative community.

Two notable ideas were threaded through this theme of the discussion. The first is teachers as leaders participated in all of the activities, modeling and sharing the same way in which they expected the attendees to participate. According to the participants it made the experience more authentic. “At the National Writing Project, the small group leaders went first. They shared their work first in the morning. It’s kind of like they came and got naked first and everybody else felt a little bit okay about disrobing” (Participant B4). The teachers described an immediate and accepting comfort level with the leaders. “I don’t remember ever hearing an unkind word from the leaders. So they were modeling that acceptance and kindness” (Participant B3). Participants also shared that because the activities were developed and facilitated by current classroom teachers; they were more authentic to the writing process and encouraged teachers to teach with a purpose beyond the state writing test. “When I think of the difference between FCAT writing and NWP writing, to me it’s the realness of it. NWP writing is real writing. It’s writing with a purpose, based on a variety of things, but it is real writing” (Participant B3).

The second idea the participants spoke about was the positive impact a group of diverse teachers can have in a learning community. “Our class had a college person in there, we had a pre-K person in there, and you had middle school, so it was very diverse even in the learning, because you made adaptations along with it” (Participant B1). The teachers found value in
interacting with teachers of different ages and subjects. “They want to be engaged at kindergarten, they want to be engaged at college. There is so much similarity even though they’re different grade levels,” Participant B3 explained. “I think the National Writing Project really helps you do that. Even though the groups may be diverse in who they’re working with, it spans very easily when you’re sharing” (Participant B3). Participant B2 referred to the demonstration lessons, or demos, and said “To see what people have been using in their classroom, the best practices, was so nice to take that with you. It was helpful to me as a teacher.” Several of the participants referred to this collection of lessons as a toolbox to which they now have unlimited access. Participant B3 summarized what she called the power of the National Writing Project:

There’s power in the day to day-ness of knowing what a classroom is like. That a lot of things make wonderful theories, not so true to what actually happens in terms of practical day to day. And I think that’s a part of the power of the NWP. They are teachers teaching teachers, and they are very realistic in understanding what the classroom is like now. It just makes the whole experience a more powerful piece, I think, for participants (Participant B3).

**Theme Four: Confidence and Professionalism**

It broadened my expertise in my field, and I appreciate that always (Participant B3).

Confidence and professionalism emerged as a theme in the transcripts from several perspectives. Some of the participants spoke of credibility they had earned with their colleagues by participating in the ISI or being associated with NWP. Several of the participants used the ISI as a springboard for future learning opportunities. One of the teachers drew great strength and a sense of confidence from the research project she explored, and having NWP work to support her
efforts back at her school. All of the focus group members reported coming away from the experience as lifelong learners.

One of the teachers was fairly new to the profession when she applied for the admission to the ISI. “I worked for a principal who just did not see me as a professional, and it drove me nuts, daily. I was so excited to be accepted into it… it proved to be the thing to get me that respect” (Participant B2). Another participant attempted to help a colleague see an alternate perspective in a situation with one of her students. After back and forth disagreement she happened to mention NWP. “Well in the National Writing Project, it would have been praised for- [The colleague] said, ‘You went to the National Writing Project?’” Participant B1 explained that it was as if instantly her argument had merit because the other teacher knew she was a member of NWP. “But it was funny. In a sense the National Writing Project does have weight among colleagues” (Participant B1). As a media specialist, Participant B3 also gained some credibility with colleagues following the ISI. “I’m no expert, but I can offer your kids an important piece that I think has validity, not just because I think so, but because it’s coming from the National Writing Project,” she explained to her colleagues. “So I think for some of our classroom teachers that gave me an experience that made me more valid in their lives” (Participant B3).

Participant B4 was not met with the same acceptance right away. But when all that she learned and used in her classroom resulted in outstanding standardized test scores for her students, she explained, “The credibility I got was when their scores were good” (Participant B4). She then told the group that her principal told her the only reason she was invited back at the school was because her writing scores were good. She continued, “The writing scores are only high because the kids believe something, the value that you can get these kids to believe and
be excited about themselves, and realize their future now. You’ve given me a compliment” (Participant B4).

Participants in the ISI have the opportunity to earn graduate credits at the host university, may become Teacher Consultants for NWP, and are introduced to a whole network of people through the local site. Several of these participants spoke about the ISI encouraging them to seek additional professional learning opportunities. At the time of the focus group interview, one of the TCs was enrolled in a master’s degree program. “It’s always been in the back of my mind to go back to grad school to get my master’s. [The ISI] pushed me. I’m back in school now, going for my master’s. That experience of wanting to learn pushed me to where I am today” (Participant B3). Another one of the teachers had the opportunity to attend the NWP national conference the year following her ISI. She described the experience as “NWP on steroids and NWP high voltage,” and said the conference was “phenomenal” (Participant B1). Participant B3 also attended some additional NWP conferences. She explained, “Having a booster shot periodically is just a powerful tool for me as a learner” (Participant B3).

I went to a follow-up technology workshop that played for me as powerfully as the original workshop did. It wasn’t just technology for technology sake. It was technology for writing. I loved the interaction that came from that because it had some of the same qualities as the [ISI] did (Participant B3).

As part of the ISI, teachers are asked to research a question that will help inform their personal teaching situations. This was one of the elements of choice given to the participants. As a teacher in an alternative school where students are often in her class for no more than 45 days, and often for much less than that, one of the participants had a very specific question she wanted
to explore. Knowing she only had a very limited time to teach writing to these students, she wanted to know the best way to grade or correct their papers. She was concerned about whether or not it was appropriate to mark up their papers. “I ended up looking- finding out that the greatest motivator, or predictor of success, was students believing they could write.” She explained how this confirmed what she believed about the power of voice. She returned to her PLC at school and told her colleagues, “Looking at what we believe is more valuable than all that we’re trying to do” (Participant B4). This teacher spoke at great length about the power of the research project and NWP as support for what she thought to be true. “From everything that I’ve done with the National Writing Project, but particularly from the summer, I feel more confident that what I’m doing is correct intuitively” (Participant B4).

All of the teachers in this focus group made some reference to being a lifelong learner, and the importance for teachers to be learning continuously. “I continue to be a lifelong learner,” said one of the participants. “I learned that the only way I can be effective as an educator was not to be a dinosaur” (Participant B1). Another teacher agreed, “Teachers are lifelong learners. I mean you have to keep up with everything and you have to keep learning. I can honestly say that the National Writing Project is the first place where I started to see that” (Participant B2). Participant B4 saw lifelong learning as understanding your abilities and your needs. “Wherever you are, here’s what I got out of it, in a big way. Wherever you are is fine. It’s fine, just to have the courage to see where you are, and how do we get to the next step” (Participant B4). “You talk about being a lifelong learner. I just think as teachers we are. Having addressed that again with a little turn of the vision was really good for me” (Participant B3)
Focus Group C. Four often overlapping themes emerged from the focus group discussions transcripts. The four themes were: *The Power of Sharing; We are Writers; Professionalism;* and *Lasting Impressions.* Each theme is discussed in this chapter with excerpts of participants’ responses and dialogue during the focus group interviews.

**Theme One: The Power of Sharing**

We got very close our little group, in sharing. And it was scary, it was really scary. But when you have such a supportive group of teachers who have probably a lot of your same fears, sharing and really relishing and celebrating that, it was just a wonderful experience (Participant C3)

Throughout the focus group meeting, participants talked about the power of sharing. Sharing was discussed in two sets of terms; teachers sharing their writing and their work with each other, and teachers sharing their ideas and resources. Participants reported, in contrast to other experiences, the collaborative culture was supportive not competitive. “I was very, very pleasantly surprised at the collaboration, and connections that I made with K through 12 [teachers],” explained one of the university instructors (Participant C3). Another teacher said, “It’s kind of fun to be in a sharing, supportive, and nurturing environment, where you know, it’s not looked at as a competition. You’re all working together, and sharing, and growing in a way that benefits you and your students” (Participant C4).

One of the participants talked about “cohesiveness and collaboration” and her memory of listening to a colleague share a piece of writing after the *invite to write.* “I sat there and thought, oh my God, what a waste of talent is out there in classrooms, and they’re not able to express their creativity, their own creative spirit” (Participant C2). She referred to the classroom teacher being strictly guarded by curriculum mandates and unable to make teaching decisions. “And how
frustrating it must be, or how silencing it must be to do that” (Participant C2). Another participant remembered her experience at the start of the ISI. She had taken a hiatus from writing after completing a fiercely competitive master’s degree program in fiction writing. She recalled feeling wounded and turning her back on writing completely, after the criticism and competition of her experience. “I did not look back until I went to the National Writing Project. And it was just an entirely different experience, so it kind of like, was a little bit of a heal-all. Like a cure” (Participant 4). She continued, “And when I came to NWP, I got to remember that it was something that I loved, and that it was mine, and I could share it with other people because I loved it” (Participant C4).

Participant C2 said, “I think the ISI was probably the first time that I did that, the whole sharing. And that’s a tough thing to do.” Another teacher spoke about the first experience sharing her writing. “And I shared for the first time, this academic piece, and that was sort of the beginning of my scholarly writing, and I got some valuable feedback from my group” (Participant C3). Later in the session, she talked about how the very piece she shared turned into her first published piece several years after the ISI.

Two of the participants described how learning to share their writing became useful to them in working with their students, and another participant recognized her comfort with sharing as a doctoral student. The high school teacher found such power in sharing with colleagues, she decided after the ISI to use a blog to help her students understand the importance of sharing. “It’s so important for them to share,” she insisted (Participant C4). “I have them post their college application essay, so they can get ideas from one another, because they get ideas from one another just like we got ideas from one another when we were together” (Participant C4).
Participant C3, a college instructor, used sharing online with her students as well. She found great value in sharing with her peers, and thought her students might benefit as well. She created an online discussion forum for students to write and engage with one another. “Basically, the focus on social- creating this social community of learners that is in cyberspace, that somehow are isolated from the face to face classroom” (Participant C3). The feedback from her students was positive; many of them saying it had been more interactive and social than any of their face to face classes. “We established a wonderful community as a result of sharing their writing” (Participant C4).

At the time of the focus group, Participant C2 was a doctoral student, and was enrolled in a qualitative writing course. The course was a seminar in writing and publishing qualitative research. She told us that out of the five students in the class, four of them were members of NWP, and she described the format of the class meetings. “We bring [articles] in, and we sit around, and we do response. And like the response leaders we critique, and we give suggestions and all that” (Participant C2). She continued to explain that the class member who had not been through the ISI “Did not have the self-efficacy to really share her writing, because she thought we would all be cutthroat,” and it took her a month to become comfortable working with the group. “And I really think that it is because you know, the four of us had been to an ISI” (Participant C2).

Personal writing was not the only type of sharing in which the participants engaged. There was the sharing of ideas and resources amongst the teachers, both during and after the ISI. “I loved coming in and actually working with other teacher’s ideas,” Participant C4 said with excitement about taking what she learned from others back to her classroom. “Great ideas, and the whole sharing, I loved the sharing idea. For me collaboration works. I’m much better as a
team than I am as one,” shared Participant C1. “I got so many wonderful ideas from kindergarten
teachers,” insisted one of the college instructors. “Because at the end of the demos, it was how
would you apply what you just saw being done?” She added, “A lot of it is sharing resources” (Participant 3). Confessing that the collaboration and sharing had as much of an impact as the
writing, one teacher said,

For me it was more about the group of people, so some of it was the interpersonal
connections. I feel like I made friends in that group, and still am in contact with some of
those same people. So I think that’s really special (Participant 1).

**Theme Two: We are Writers**

That was the first time that they had freedom in what they could write. Yet they were
going to teach writing. So that really pivoted in the direction that we needed to do more
just writing (Participant C2).

The National Writing Project (NWP) does not select the ISI attendees based on levels of
skill in writing, or whether or not the teacher has written formally or for publication. Therefore
the teacher participants came with varying degrees of experience and comfort level with writing.
However, on several occasions throughout the focus group, the teachers alluded to the idea that if
they were going to teach writing, they should be writers. One said immediately at the onset of the
discussion, “I had always considered myself a teacher of writing, but not a writer” (Participant
C3). Another described the value in writing daily as she prepared to teach a literacy course
during the fall semester following the ISI. “I became the learner. I think I released more of my
own writing in a relaxed way. And I wrote more for my own purpose than to model writing, and
that was a great awakening for me” (Participant C2). She continued, “That whole powerful thing
of reconnecting, even with myself, was really good for me, and it was also good for what I did when I was teaching literacy at that time” (Participant C2).

Part of the design of the ISI, is throughout the day, and the weeks, there is scheduled time for teachers to write. The participants valued this time for personal writing and professional reflection. “Yeah, there was always that reflection… We had the invitation to write in the beginning, and then we met at the end, and we did the [response group] circle. And we reflected on the day” (Participant C3).

Going to the ISI gave us time to stop, and think, and reflect, and question. At the beginning, I was thinking good gracious. We are going to spend four weeks? But then, that’s what it takes. It takes time for everything to really get in, and be able to percolate, and then to be able to come out as fresh new ideas, and I guess really be transformational. (Participant C1).

The nice thing about the Writing Project is when we are there, we offer them a space, and we actually force them, at least in the morning when we do that invite to write, to write for themselves, because it is so easy to have that time taken from you, and you can’t really know what’s involved in writing unless you have to do the writing yourself (Participant C4).

One of the teachers, the doctoral student, talked about the journey to find her voice in her dissertation writing. She struggled with traditional views about referring to herself in the third person while writing a qualitative study, and felt empowered by her experiences writing at the ISI:
The ISI that summer and being able to write with my own voice, that cinched it. And it did help me, you know, gain confidence to say this is not who I am, you can’t make me into this third person. It’s not me (Participant C2).

All of the teachers said, after the experience of the ISI, they write with their students. “I realized, you know, we are writers. I write along with them. And they just, they think it’s wonderful that you’re actually doing the assignments” (Participant C3). Participant C4 was also insistent about writing with her students:

If you allow yourself to be pulled away from it too much… then you lose some of your effectiveness, because you’re not going through the experience yourself, and you have to remember what that experience is like. In order to be good, and pass it on, I think (Participant C4).

**Theme Three: Professionalism**

I was just so happy to be around people who had the same level of expectations, who pushed themselves to be professional, and to do more than what’s required, and to care about what they’re doing (Participant C1).

The level of professionalism participants associated with the IS emerged as three smaller subthemes. They recognized a high level of professionalism amongst their peers, they were impressed with the professionalism of the teachers teaching teachers model, and some of them believed they developed an increased level of professionalism moving forward in their careers. In describing her work ethic, one participant shared, “I felt like I had been this anomaly in a lot of different places where I had worked, and I kind of felt like I didn’t fit in a lot of places” (Participant C1). She continued to explain that she felt like she fit in at the ISI. “That was my
biggest take away is just the type of people that were there, and what they expected, and how they worked” (Participant C1). Another aspect she found distinctive about the experience was the way the participants were treated and the contributions they were able to make. “You’re invested for a long time, and you’re actively engaged, you’re participating, you’re doing things… you’re creating part of the curriculum yourself, and presenting, and having other people be engaged in doing your activities” (Participant C1). One of the others also valued the contribution of the attendees. “I think with NWP and the fact that the participants are such an important part of the whole process, made me realize that that’s how I want to run my classroom also” (Participant C4).

Equal praise was given to the facilitators of the ISI. “It’s been professional, it’s been worthwhile, the people who have been there have been experts. It has been that same high level” (Participant C2). “I loved the way it was organized. I thought the organization of it was done well, everything that we did. I loved the facilitators, so I just appreciated it” (Participant C1). Participants valued the model of teachers teaching teachers. “The fact that it’s local; it’s teachers who are in touch with the culture that the other teachers are working in,” Participant C2 explained. She made the distinction between the ISI and other types of professional development, calling it “teacher centered.”

Local people are giving it to local people. And the facilitators are not bound to fidelity to the state, to the voice from the state. This is totally independent, and it’s a voice that needs to be heard in an independent way (Participant C2).
You just present who you are, there’s nothing put-on about it, and so you know, that’s the real tangible thing, that it’s teachers serving teachers, with the kind of voice they’ve developed themselves, and want to germinate in other people (Participant 2).

Two of the participants talked about the professionalism they developed as a result of the ISI. One of them went on to publish a piece of writing that she started during the ISI. Another became a facilitator in many of the subsequent ISIs. “And it’s a blessing because you really do learn how to become a halfway decent presenter when you’re at NWP” (Participant C4). She continued on with a giggle as she talked about the technology and teaching strategies she has learned through NWP. “All these things that NWP taught me, once people figure out you know how to do it; you get hired to do this stuff” (Participant C4). She concluded with a realization, “I’ve gone and done a lot of different consulting things that I would not have had… But I don’t know that I could have done that without the National Writing Project” (Participant C4).

**Theme Four: Lasting Impressions**

I still am interested in the all of the activities, and the lessons, and the things that I learned, and still trying to incorporate them. So it stays with you (Participant C1)

A pervasive theme in this focus group was a change in perspective, and the lasting affect that the ISI seemed to have on each of them. Each of them went back to the NWP in some capacity to work on ISIs, additional conferences, or the NWP leadership team. All four of them identified specific changes and additions they had made to their classrooms and courses, and they verbalized a commitment to keep making these adjustments in the future. There was mention of transformation, change of perspective, and new ways of thinking.
The participants shared many specific examples of strategies and lessons they learned from their colleagues at the ISI, but the single most talked about component was the *invitation to write*, or what NWP TC’s have shortened to the *invite to write*. All four members of this focus group said they now use it in their classes. “The invite to write, I have done that. I’m going to be writing a new curriculum for some training, for my student teachers, and the first thing I thought of was that I need to incorporate that invite to write” (Participant C1). Participant C2 said after the ISI, “That fall I went back in my content class and just added invite to write. I added a lot of things from the ISI, you know- to that course.” Participant C3 also added the invite to write. “So after that Institute, I implemented the invitation to write with my students, which was wonderful because we were doing descriptive writing, and so they could talk about themselves” (Participant C3).

Besides implementation of ideas, participants expressed a change in attitude or perspective as a result of the ISI. One participant shared the words of an attendee that resonated with her, “They had broken the bondage of the scripted writing program” (Participant C2). Participant C3, who shared at the start of the session that prior to the ISI she did not see herself as a writer, told the group she started a blog after the ISI. Now when people ask her if she writes she responds, “Well of course I write. I have a website, I have a blog” (Participant C3).

Participant C2 shared that, “Writing took on this whole other meaning there. I think a part of it was that it validated that there are different ways to look at writing.” Participant C4, the teacher with a master’s degree in fiction writing, used to be focused on fixing her writing and correcting written work. She explained the ISI, “Reminded me of why I really wrote in the first place, which was to communicate, not to make money. So it was refreshing, and soothing. It was really fun for me to see writing from a teacher’s point of view” (Participant C4). As a teacher she
was able to recognize, “NWP, when you go through it, you learn of all different ways you can get kids to assimilate information… all these real world ways of writing

Two participants talked seriously about their ability to change and be agents of change. “You have to have time for transformations to take place. And ISI provided that. And you know, by the end of four weeks, I was happy to have been there for four weeks” (Participant C1). Participant C2 found that immersing herself into the culture of the ISI empowered her to want a more positive writing experience for her student teachers, as they prepared to be teachers of writing. She made changes to her course and some of their writing assignments, and she reflected on her decision.

I didn’t want my students to leave without some experiences that would motivate them to use it with their students. Because I am afraid of that pigeonholed, didactic, this is how you should think. And I truly believe that that’s a real danger to our culture, and to our democracy. And so, I just didn’t want to do it anymore (Participant C2)
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This phenomenological study focused primarily on one question: What was the lived experience of the Invitational Summer Institute (ISI) of the National Writing Project (NWP) like for participants? Additionally, I sought to explore in what ways, if any, the experience may have influenced perceptions of classroom teaching practice and perceptions of self-efficacy, and whether or not the participants’ perception of the influence of the ISI changed over time.

Literature about effective professional development informed the study. However, the purpose was more to give voice to the perspectives of teachers about what works and does not work in professional development and why.

After bracketing my own experience in a personal narrative, I conducted focus groups and analyzed the transcripts. Two focus groups in this study were coded independently of each other, and independently of the focus group from a pilot study (Kemp, 2011, unpublished). Following a review of my own experience, I may have expected to hear teachers in the two focus groups (Focus Groups B and C) talk about the same themes revealed in my narrative, or I may have expected themes to be similar to those emerging from the pilot study, referred to as Focus Group A (Kemp, 2011, unpublished). Additional themes one might expect to emerge are those appearing in the literature on effective professional development. The study participants shared thoughts and feelings, and four themes emerged from each of the two focus groups, some outlined in the literature and others more specific to the phenomenon. Themes from each of the focus groups overlapped with one another and the pilot group, and provided insight about what teachers believed make the ISI a meaningful professional development experience.
Capturing the Phenomenon

Collaboration. The ISI participants each spoke about the benefit of collaborative activities as a strategy for professional development (Colbert, et. al., 2008; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond et. al., 2009; Eaker, Dufour, & Dufour, 2008; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2007; Guskey, & Yoon, 2009; McLaughlin, 2011). According to Taylor (2008) adult learning tends to be holistic, in which feelings, intuition, and relationships with others figure into the learning process. This became evident in the overlapping themes that emerged from all three groups. Focus Group B’s theme emerged as Sense of Community and Focus Group C’s theme emerged as The Power of Sharing. In the pilot study (Kemp, 2011, unpublished) the related emergent theme of Focus Group A was Fellowship and Collegiality. Hargreaves (1995) argued teachers are socially motivated, and according to Wenger (1996) people who engage in this process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor create a community of practice.

Participants made a clear distinction between the ISI and other types of professional development they had attended. Terms and phrases used by the participants to describe the collegial environment were in alignment with the distinct components of a community of practice, as described by Wenger (2006). According to Wenger (2006), they had established domain, the first characteristic of a community of practice, which includes commitment to and competence in the domain. Someone in Focus Group B called the ISI attendees, “A group of people who are committed,” and another asserted, “We wanted to be there.” A third described the group as, “A community of people who valued writing.” In Focus Group C, one participant described her colleagues as “People who had the same level of expectations” and “Who do more than what’s required.” She also said later about the group, “They are similar in professionalism,
expectation, work ethic.” Members of Focus Group A (Kemp, 2011, unpublished) also acknowledged the commitment of the group. One of them recalled, by being there all day, every day for four weeks, they were able to work through challenges. “The wheels keep on turning and everyone keeps on going” (Kemp, 2011, unpublished). I made a similar statement in my personal narrative; “Every person who attended, was there because they wanted to be, and for the same purpose” (Kemp, 2011, unpublished).

The second characteristic of the community of practice is the community, which according to Wenger (2006) includes member interaction and relationship building. Descriptions of the relationships between participants in the ISI support the established community. There was “camaraderie,” and a “real genuine community,” according to one of the participants from Focus Group B. Two participants from the same group described a “family dynamic,” and another said it was a community that was “very supportive.” Members of Focus Group C remembered the ISI community was “very supportive, not competitive” and that it was a “sharing, supportive, nurturing environment.” They described “interpersonal connections” and one member said, “We got very close, our little group.” “Fellowship, collegiality, camaraderie, support, and acceptance were all words used by focus group [A] participants to describe the relationships they formed during their participation in the ISI” (Kemp, 2011, unpublished). I also recognized the relationships I built during the ISI, as I wrote in my narrative: “We created a community of writers, of thinkers, of teachers, to whom I feel forever connected” (Kemp, 2011, unpublished).

The third characteristic Wenger (2006) identified in a community of practice is the practice, a shared set of resources and repertoire between the practitioners. Several members of Focus Group B talked about the take away value of the demo lessons and the binder with everyone’s research and lesson plans. This Focus Group related particularly to the power of the
research projects during the ISI, and the validation and credibility it gave to their intuition about good teaching practices. In Focus Group C, one member explained, “We got ideas from one another” and “Great ideas; I loved the sharing of ideas.” Another recalled, “We were all working together, sharing, and growing.” One of the members of Focus Group C told the rest of the group about two web pages created by an NWP TC after the ISI, where many teachers meet to share stories, ideas, and resources. Throughout Focus Group C, all of the participants talked about using each other’s ideas and recalling who taught them each strategy. All of them reportedly continue to try and insert ISI and NWP strategies into their classes. Members of Focus Group A, in the original study (Kemp, 2011, unpublished) talked quite a bit about the shared philosophy of the NWP, established through the ISI. It emerged as one of the strongest themes of their group:

*It's Not a Program, It's a Philosophy.* Though the ISI provided takeaway materials and strategies, there was no kit or curriculum set given to each of the attendees. There was a sharing of best practices and exchange of ideas and perspectives. In addition to recalling specifics about their favorite pieces and who shared them, every participant from all three focus groups referred to their use of the *invite to write*, with students on a regular basis following the ISI. The participants confirmed Lieberman & Wood’s (2001) assertion that the social practice of the NWP serves as an impetus for ongoing learning, and when the expectation is that teachers contribute, they want to make sure they are worthy to contribute. The ISI participants’ all chose for one reason or another, to apply to the ISI, to attend when invited, and to remain connected to the NWP; first for four whole weeks of their summer vacation, and then on an ongoing basis thereafter. Their common interest was and remains writing, and the teaching of writing.

**Voice.** View and DeMulder (2009) suggested, “As teachers discover the power of their own voices, they are able to re-envision their roles as critical educators who empower their
students” (p. 35). Voice emerged as one of the most pervasive themes across every one of the focus groups by way of writing, and engaging as participants in a supportive learning process. In Focus Group B, voice was addressed by the participants in terms of *Empowerment through Positive Culture*, and in Focus Group C voice surfaced as *We are Writers*. Additionally, in the pilot study, the theme *Awareness of Self as Writer* (Kemp, 2011, unpublished) was largely about the teachers finding their voices in their own writing. One participant from Focus Group B was adamant about empowerment as the overall culture at the ISI. She said freedom to try without fear, made them all better writers when they walked out than they were when they came in. Another participant in Focus Group B spoke intensely and often, about this concept of voice. She expressed that every time she came in contact with an NWP workshop or event, especially at the ISI, she came away with “that feeling” her voice had value. She talked about finding her own voice at the ISI by writing and sharing, and was delighted at how dynamic it was to be able to pass this value of voice onto her students, by valuing what they had to say. “You know the empowerment of having a voice or having someone listen to them, or seeing their thoughts on paper validating that whatever they have to bring to the table is valuable.” The same teacher described how important it was to feel she had a voice, because without it she did not know how she would teach and empower others.

Group C participants also discussed the power of finding their voices. One talked about “reconnecting” with herself through writing at the ISI, and how writing in a more relaxed way and for her own purpose “was a great awakening.” She explained that she gained a new confidence about her ability to make an important decision in regard to writing her doctoral dissertation. “Being able to write with my own voice clinched it.” Another member of Focus Group C shared the experience of finding her voice again after turning her back on writing,
because of a negative and competitive graduate program. She said coming to the ISI was entirely different because she got to remember how much she enjoyed writing. She recalled, “I got to remember it was mine and I could share it with other people because I loved it.” Focus Group C also had a participant who confessed she never thought of herself as a writer, only a teacher of writing. She realized after writing every day during the ISI, and sharing with her colleagues, she indeed was a writer. After the ISI, when people asked her if she was a writer, she would reply emphatically, “Yes, I am a writer.”

Members of the pilot focus group (Kemp, 2011, unpublished) also found themselves developing an awareness of themselves as writers. Throughout the focus group transcripts I found many phrases about previous perceptions such as, “I never really saw myself as anyone who had anything to contribute to the writing world.” Another teacher in this group described a love for “playing with words,” but said “I never ever thought of myself as a writer.” All of these teachers recognized the value their voices had for teaching their students. “I got to write and find out who I was as a writer… writing myself I had discovered a lot of ways to help students.” Many of the participants reported great significance in the experience of being in their students’ shoes as writers, and knowing the intimidation of writing and sharing with their peers. As Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) suggested active participation and learning helped these teachers transform their teaching. They took the power of the experience they had themselves, empathized with their students, and tried to create safe spaces for their students. This is also an identifiable way their participation in the ISI has influenced their classroom teaching.

Teachers in the focus groups also recalled the power of being given voice in the learning process. In Focus Group B, one participant made the distinction between the ISI and other professional development experiences, when she said the people of NWP actually cared about
what she had to say, rather than just what they wanted to say to her. The perception one TC had of the ISI facilitators was they did not just value the information; they valued the participants and what they brought to the learning situation. The importance of experience is a key understanding of andragogy (Knowles, 1984) both in consideration of previous experiences and creating new experiences. Merriam (2008) argued, to truly create effective adult learning systems, instructors must connect new learning to previous experience and allow learners to reflect. One member of Focus Group C recalled writing a piece in the ISI, and reflecting on why she thought it was not very good. As she thought about what she needed to do to improve it, she thought, “All right, I’m going to try this in class now.” Reflecting on experiences was a big part of the ISI. One of the participants recalled, “There was so much of that. We reflected on the day. And I think that was the beginning of my whole reflecting on my teaching.” Another participant said, “Going to the ISI gave us time to stop, and think, and reflect, and question.”

Moustakas (1995) described learning as a process that awakens, challenges, disturbs, and intrigues the learner. This type of learning might be described by Mezirow (1996) as a transformation. The participants in this study all described in varying degrees, a transformation in them as individuals, and as teachers. There were realizations about who they were as writers, and changes in philosophy that led to adjustments in their teaching practice. Another aspect of transformation is the distinction between knowledge acquisition and learning through transformation (Mezirow, 1996). The participants repeatedly talked about the process and the experiences, but rarely referred to the activities in the ISI as a program, or a set of materials they would “get” and then pass on to their students. As Lieberman & Wood (2001) discovered in their interviews with NWP teachers, the work of NWP is not a collection of techniques, an organizational structure, or a codified body of knowledge.
Teachers Teaching Teachers. Another theme or subtheme in every group was the teachers teaching teachers model of the ISI. Participants emphasized the credibility of knowing the leaders were current classroom teachers. “It’s a very powerful tool they use,” one participant said about the teachers teaching teachers format of the ISI, because they “Are living your life in another building.” Another participant said, “They’re very understanding of what the classroom is like now.” There was discussion by participants, about in-service or workshops, and outside consultants hired by the local school districts. They expressed resentment or a lack of confidence about people who do not work in classrooms, coming in to tell them how to teach. The participants reported they found great value in the teachers teaching teachers model, because they were able to see the teaching in action from the person really using the lesson or strategy in a proven context, someone who was “in the trenches.” One teacher said, “There’s power in the day to day-ness of knowing what a classroom is like.” This teachers teaching teachers model made the lesson more meaningful, and made them more likely to want to try it themselves. The culture of the ISI, “sets a norm for rotating leadership” (Lieberman & Wood, 2001, p. 29) because each teacher designs and presents a demonstration lesson, and the daily discussions, lessons, and activities are facilitated by other teachers. While most professional development programs and activities do not utilize the professional judgment and decisions of teachers (Colbert et. al., 2008), the ISI relies on the professionalism of teachers.

Andragogy and Transformation. The job of the adult educator, to truly create a transformative experience is to help learners look at their beliefs and behaviors, not only in the moment but throughout their lives (Mezirow, 1991). The experience of participating in the ISI brought teachers together to collaborate, and to validate, to inform, and to empower them to make changes as individuals and as educators. To capture the essence of the lived experience in
the context of adult learning, one might consider the principles of andragogy, or adult learning theory. The andragogical model is framed around process rather than content. The emphasis on active engagement and experience demonstrates the influence of constructivists such as John Dewey and Jerome Bruner. In a traditional education model, the teacher would plan lessons containing knowledge and skills to be transmitted to the students. In the andragogical model, the facilitator plans procedures and sets up experiences for the learner to derive meaning. Content is no less important in the latter model; the difference is between knowledge transmission in the first model, and procedures and resources for acquisition and skills in the second (Knowles & Holton III, 2011).

Knowles (1980) outlined four assumptions of andragogy, which can be used to summarize the experiences of the participants in the ISI. The theory of andragogy is just one lens through which to consider some of the influential aspects of the ISI as a professional development experience.

Assumption 1: Adults have a deep psychological need to be generally self-directing.

Several aspects of the participants’ description illustrate the first of Knowles’ (1980) assumptions. First, the ISI attendees, though invited to attend, sought the opportunity and applied by choice. The ISI is invitational, voluntary, and collaborative. It is not offered or provided by a specific school or district. Second, the ISI is facilitated by teachers, with the help of the participants. As one focus group member explained, the attendees are both consumers and producers during the ISI. “Participants were such an important part of the whole process,” someone explained. Another participant noted the acknowledgement by NWP of the value the learners brought to the experience. One of them declared, “It’s not someone up there telling you that you need to do this and this is how you do it.” Each of the participants selected their own
research question and professional work to be read and reviewed. They developed demonstration lessons on the topic, strategy, or lesson of choice. Finally, they write a creative piece, giving individual voice to every teacher participant in the Institute.

Assumption 2: As people develop they accumulate experiences, and people attach more meaning to learning gained from experience. Therefore primary techniques in adult education should be experiential. All of the participants talked about the importance of living and experiencing the things they would be sharing with their students. The pilot group (Kemp, 2011, unpublished) emphasized, “Being there experiences,” and “shared experiences,” but all of the groups reminisced about the field trips as powerful components to the ISI learning environment. Having these experiences led the participants to try and recreate this same type of experience for their students. The power they drew from the experience of writing every day also gave them new insight to their students and to themselves as writers. Additionally, they experienced each of the demonstration lessons as students, giving them the student perspective. One TC explained, “You’re creating part of the curriculum yourself, and presenting, and having other people engaged in your activities.”

Assumption 3: Adults’ readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of their social roles. Arguably, the degree of readiness of the adult learner may be linked to the degree to which the learner desires to be in the learning environment. However, as previously addressed, all of these teachers asked to be invited to participate in the ISI. Each of them was searching for something and came ready to learn. Whether they wanted to explore their own writing or become a better writing teacher, most of them seemed to have gotten both. Their roles of teacher and writer were nurtured through the ISI experience. No one told them they needed training or coursework in this area, they felt a need and a desire, leading
them to seek it out and come prepared to learn. Their minds and hearts seemed open to the experience. One TC pointed out, “We chose to be there.” In Focus Group B, one of the TC’s in particular spent a great deal of time at the ISI examining how this experience would shape her social role back at her school. As soon as she realized her voice would not only be recognized but validated, she understood this as an important piece she could bring back to her students and to her role on the faculty at her school. Another participant, re-examined her role in contributing to the positive culture and perpetuation of democracy by allowing her own students to have the experiences described by the participants of the ISI, with regard to freedom and voice. Every participant verbalized in some way, how the experiences and the approach of the ISI immediately impacted their roles as educators.

Assumption 4: Adult learners see education as a process of increasing competence, and therefore desire immediacy of application. As described by the participants, there was no acquisition of materials, set scope and sequence, or structured core knowledge given to them at the ISI. The philosophical approach transformed their pedagogy and gave them a framework for immediately applying it in their classrooms. They did not have to learn a new system, adopt special materials, or change everything they were doing. They modified or adjusted the approach to their instruction in a new way. Several of them described the value of learning from a teacher not a theorist. They talked about the “nuggets” they got from other teachers or the strategies they “stole” and immediately tried in their classrooms. The power of teachers teaching teachers gave them the sense of immediacy that adult learners often look for. One teacher talked directly to her peer in the same focus group, and exclaimed that she used her idea for teaching paradoxes with her high school English students. Another asked a member of her focus group to tell a co-worker who had been to the ISI, that she uses her lesson on metaphors all of the time. In one of the focus
groups, a participant talked about learning to blog from the other, and she immediately started a blog with her students the fall semester following the ISI. Again, all teachers reportedly implemented the *invite to write* in their teaching environments.

**Additional Research Questions**

After capturing the lived experience of the ISI as a phenomenon shared by the participants, I used their words and the emergent themes to describe what it was like for them. I also reconsidered the secondary research questions. The first of these questions was: *In what ways does the experience of the ISI influence teacher perceptions of self-efficacy?* Bandura (2006) theorized that the perception of efficacy affects whether people think positively or negatively. Based on social-cognitive theory, a teacher’s self-efficacy may be conceptualized as the belief in his or her ability to do what it takes to achieve educational goals, such as an increase in student achievement (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Therefore, professional development should be a powerful tool for strengthening the self-efficacy of educators (Mizell, 2008).

Teachers in all of the focus groups described feelings of increased self-efficacy in various ways. Focus Group B teachers talked repeatedly about the power of their own voices giving them better ability to help their students find their voices. One of them insisted she would not have been able to help her students in this way, had she not had the experience herself. She talked about her ability to help them write by instilling in them the belief they could write. Validation of her voice empowered her to provide the same validation for her students. Another teacher in the same group described feelings of confidence and self-efficacy when she acted on the philosophies of NWP when standing up to a colleague in a disagreement about a student’s writing. “I can offer your kids an important piece that I think has validity,” is what a media specialist TC said to the teachers in her school, upon her return from the ISI.
Focus Group C participants also talked about becoming more effective in the way they used writing in their curricula. They started using blogs and other technology tools and applied NWP writing philosophies in their assessments by accepting various genres and types of writing. All of these adjustments to their classes resulted in higher student motivation and increased engagement, indicators of increased effectiveness in their practice. “Stealing” ideas from one another, which they talk about light-heartedly knowing that the sharing of ideas is a cornerstone of the ISI, and swapping lessons and resources allowed the participants to increase their repertories and meet the needs of their students. In Focus Group A (Kemp, 2011, unpublished) confidence and self-efficacy were improved through deeper understanding and immersion in research within the field of writing. One of the participants noted, “I feel a sense of pride that I do know about writing through my deep understanding, and reading what the good researchers have done.” Ingvarson, et. al. (2005) suggested teacher self-efficacy depends on how much teachers feel their practices have improved, thus resulting in student learning outcomes being improved as well. The combination of being treated as professionals, having their voices validated, having time to write and reflect, and the study of writing research all seemed to contribute to feelings of self-efficacy among participants of the ISI.

The second question was: *In what ways does the experience of the ISI influence perceptions of teacher practice?* The influence of the ISI could not be left out of the description of the experience. Everything in the language and mood of the participants sheds light about how their teaching has changed. There were small changes to their classroom activities, such as implementing *invite to write*, or using an idea from a teacher’s demo lesson. However, there were large scale changes to the whole way with which they approached teaching in their classrooms. One teacher found through her individual research project, that what she was
teaching her students about writing was likely not as important as instilling in her students the belief they can write. In the emotional volatile environment of the alternative school in which she taught, this had great influence in the way she continued to teach writing by building a community in her classroom. Also supported by the research and credibility of NWP, another teacher developed the confidence to take a risk about the way she would assess her students at the end of her course. Though accrediting agencies and state mandates requiring students to demonstrate certain objectives, she realized following her experience at the ISI, there were infinite products students could create to show they had met these objectives. She began giving them choices on their final critical tasks. She added the comment that she actually enjoys reading and grading them now because of the change that came from the understanding, “There’s no one way to write.”

Still another participant talked about the freedom it gave her to let loose from the curriculum materials being used in her school. She was able to look at it more critically and understand that parts of it were good, and she knew better ways to teach the same thing differently. Two of the college instructors talked about the impact the ISI had for an online class and a new curriculum project. The first explained the implementation of casual social writing in her class, through an online chat she created for her students; not where they turned in work, or had instruction, but where they could provide networking and support for each other. The instructor realized the importance of the community of practice during the ISI, and recognized the benefit it may have for her students. The second realized the impact of using writing for a course not specifically designed for writing. As she prepared to write a new piece of curriculum at the time of the focus group, she verbalized how important the tenets of the ISI and NWP
would be in making the curriculum more meaningful for the students. Story after story revealed the influence the ISI experience had on the teachers’ classroom practice.

The last question was: *In what ways does the participants’ perception of the influence of the ISI change over time?* Time can be considered through two lenses in this study. The first is simply by the year each of the participants attended the ISI, and therefore the number of years they have been committed to the philosophy and approaches since their experiences of the phenomenon. Participants in the two focus groups were from the classes of 2000-2010. One of them attended in 2000, two of them attended in 2008, and five of them attended in 2010. In the pilot Focus Group, there were two from the year 2002, one from 2003, one from 2005, and two from 2010 (Kemp, 2011, unpublished). Since their summers at the ISI, one of the TCs organized five subsequent ISIs, four of them became facilitators at subsequent ISIs, and three of them took on advanced leadership roles within the NWP site. In summary, each of these fifteen teachers has maintained involvement with The Project and its events for anywhere from three to ten years, depending on how long ago they attended the ISI. Each of them has attended follow-up events, fostered ongoing relationships, and continued to approach teaching with the NWP philosophy.

The second lens, through which the lasting influence may be considered, is the indication that the approach and ideas shared through the ISI are still being implemented by TC’s in their teaching practice. The continued use of strategies learned at the ISI, and commitment to the ideology of NWP, from teachers who experienced the ISI in the past year or several years prior, exemplified the lasting influence of the phenomenon. Perceptions of the experience seemed to surface just as powerfully for veteran participants, as it did for recent participants. The participants’ current commitment to the ideology was apparent in their language. One participant in Focus Group B said it was important, “We are keeping alive what we started then.” Another
member of the same group was clear about the influence the ISI had on her as an educator when she decided to return to graduate school for a degree in Educational Leadership. She said, “If I could ever replicate what we did there at a school I was running, man I would feel like I have accomplished a lot. So it’s definitely pushed me in the direction to replicate, or try to repeat what’s happened here for us.” One of the emergent themes in Focus Group C was *Lasting Impressions*. One teacher said she is still interested in all of the activities she learned about, and she noted, “It stays with you.” There was also discussion about how the teachers would begin to look at the new Common Core State Standards, to be fully adopted by the state the following year, through the lens of NWP. Again, the teachers all talked about taking an ongoing look at how they can find ways to improve their teaching, use the ideas they learned from the ISI, and continue to collaborate with TC’s in the network.

**Limitations**

The sample size of this study was small; there were two focus groups with four to five participants. I captured the perceptions of nine teachers, and with the additional six teachers from the pilot group (Kemp, 2011, unpublished), there was a total of 15 descriptions of the phenomenon. However, as previously noted, qualitative research relies on the personal experiences and interaction between the participants (Polkinghorne, 2005). The researcher is more concerned with enriching understanding of the experience, than with how many sources from which the data comes. (Polkinghorne, 2005; Merriem, 2002). The participants in this study exemplified the interpersonal dynamic. Many of the comments made were in response to comments from other participants. Sometimes one teacher would speak and another would say, “I want to piggy back off of what [another participant] said,” or “To dovetail off what you said...” At one point in a focus group, one participant said to another, “I like how you said
empower. That’s exactly what it is.” These additional comments or stories may not have been drawn out during an individual interview or narrative. Additional participants in the focus group might have impeded this dynamic because of the difficulty with turn-taking in large groups. This interpersonal dynamic may also explain why the narrative submitted by the TC from FSU was brief and did not inform the study.

However, additional focus groups from other NWP network sites may have provided more triangulation. Due to the small sample size, there are limits to how broadly the findings can be generalized. Shenton (2004) cautioned, however, that researchers can easily become preoccupied with transferability, but the results of the study need to be understood in the context of the specific characteristics of the setting. The results of this study may be more generalizable if repeated in other network sites of the NWP.

Participants also attended the ISI over the course of 10 years. This may be considered a limitation because they did not all experience the exact same phenomenon in the same way. However, two factors help to alleviate this consideration: one uncovered during the focus group, the other supported through NWP practice and literature. First, the participants attended the ISI during several different years. They did not all share the exact same ISI, but they talked about similar experiences and similar themes emerged through their interaction. Additionally, within the entire 15 person sample, including the pilot group, several of them experienced the same ISI as another participant (Kemp, 2011, unpublished). Many of them described similar feelings and transformational changes, within and across the years they attended. Second, not all ISIs are the same, but they follow a widely used NWP framework, and consist mostly of the same types of activities. This limitation might also be addressed by repetition of the study at additional network sites.
Another possible limitation, which cannot be controlled by the researcher, is that upon solicitation of participants, I was only able to attract those who found the ISI to be a positive experience. No TC’s volunteered to contribute why the ISI may not have been a good professional development experience. Therefore, I was limited to those opinions and perspectives of the TCs who enjoyed the ISI, and their ongoing relationships through the National Writing Project.

The interviews collected in this study were coded by an individual researcher. As a former ISI attendee, and current Teacher Consultant with the NWP, I would have met the criteria for participation in the study. My involvement with NWP might be perceived as a threat to validity. As recommended by phenomenologists, I bracketed out my personal experience in descriptive terms (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; van Mannen, 1990) by writing a narrative prior to meeting with participants and analyzing the focus group interview transcripts. I also provided detailed documentation of the methodology, which will provide the reader with a view into the research practice and the use of appropriate method (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). My membership in NWP may also serve as strength for the study. According to Moustakas (1994) phenomenological investigations are often a result of the researcher’s personal interest in what she seeks to know; the researcher is intimately connected with the phenomenon. Van Manen (1990) suggested qualitative researchers approach the research with a certain pedagogic interest in the question being asked and this is what orients him or her to phenomenon. Phenomenological descriptions lead us to the realization that our experiences are also the possible experiences of others.
Implications

This study was an exploration into the lived experience of nine teacher participants in the Invitational Summer Institute of the National Writing Project at Florida Gulf Coast University. Though there is extensive literature on recommended characteristics of effective professional development, and how the incorporation of these characteristics may lead to improvement in student achievement, few studies have voiced what teachers say about effective professional development. This study and the pilot study gleaned the perspectives of 15 teachers who shared a single phenomenon within a single site of a network of over 200; however, it captured rich descriptions about why the participants found this particular experience to be so powerful and influential (Kemp, 2011, unpublished). The study could be repeated with representative sites across the country to reveal similarities or disparities common to the ISI within the network. Multiple focus groups within each site can be conducted for additional perspectives, and additional effort should be made to include ethnically diverse and male participants.

Broad generalizations about the impact of the ISI and the work of the NWP cannot be made from a single study. The ISI is not exactly the same every year at each of the sites, and similar principles applied in a different context may not yield the same type of experience. Though the sample size was small, the participants provided descriptions of experiences that align with the literature on effective professional development, and support adult learning principles. Globally, this study further informs the field from a teacher’s perspective, and provides qualitative data to support the teacher’s voice as a valid contribution. Knowles’ theory of andragogy put learners first, to strive to help them meet their needs and encourage educators to constantly be available to guide learners to success (Blondy, 2007). Fostering and encouraging self-directed learning is a responsibility of adult educators (Cranton, 1994), in this case staff
developers. Professional development activities and programs operating under the assumptions of the theory of andragogy may result in increased engagement, higher motivation, and transformation by the participants thereby contributing to perceptions of self-efficacy.

A more specific role of this study may be to support the goals of the National Writing Project. The network sites can use this study to further inform and affirm their work. As professional development is mandatorily outlined in school budgets and improvement plans, and education funds continue to be cut, there will be an increased need for professional development providers to show how and why their approach should be considered.

Conclusions

The participants’ previous experiences, existing schema, and individual purposes for participation create a complex lens through which they each viewed their experience. Their willingness to share their stories demonstrated a desire to be heard and to affirm their work with one another and the research community. While they did not articulate their experiences by listing what works in professional development, their stories and discussions revealed the ISI was a meaningful professional development experience with lasting effects in their classrooms. Whether they applied new strategies, adopted a new approach to writing, or transformed their views about teaching and learning, each participant found great value in the experience and the connection they continue to have with NWP, as a result of the ISI experience.

Recommendations for Future Study. Leaders in the National Writing Project organization might benefit the project by repeating this type of study with TC’s across the country. Such studies might help determine if the phenomenon is widespread or if it varies from site to site in different locations. Capturing the essence of what makes the ISI such a dynamic experience for teachers can help to affirm and inform the work of the project. With federal funding for
educational programs run outside the traditional school setting, justifying the use of federal dollars with nationally collected data can help further the cause of the project. Additionally, network sites can funnel their finances through the aspects of the project, such as the ISI, that can have the most lasting and powerful impact on the organization’s mission. Other institutes and immersion programs for teachers might also benefit from this type of study. There might be data to suggest that other similarly designed professional development experiences yield the same or similar results for teachers. Other planners may be looking for what factors can make the design of their programs more dynamic and influential on teachers’ attitudes and practice. Follow up studies about teachers’ attitudes toward writing might also be beneficial. The TCs in this study were forthcoming about a change in their beliefs pertaining to their own writing, and how this change influenced the way they taught writing to their students. The perception of these teachers is that they are now more effective at teaching writing because of this paradigm shift. With such a large amount of school funding being attached to student achievement, it might also be useful to consider the achievement of students in the classrooms of NWP teachers.

**Recommendations for Professional Development Activities.** While there is much in the literature about what the experts and seminal authors believe to be the most important factors in planning effective professional development, little can be found about what teachers say about what works for them. Teachers often describe their experience in the summer institute as life-changing (Boykin, Z., Scrivner, J., & Robbins, S., 2004) and transformative (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2007). Further examination of the themes emerging from this study yield several suggestions for the planning of professional development activities:

- **Community and Collaboration**- Teachers should be given time to work together toward a common purpose. This may include student achievement as an end result; however, they
should be able to choose an aspect of their teaching for which they have a passion and a desire to collaborate with others toward meeting their personal and professional goals. Teachers in the NWP have a shared purpose, not specific to their own students or the test scores of the children in their school, but to improve the teaching of writing everywhere.

- **Teacher Empowerment** - Today’s teachers are held to what reportedly feels like impossible standards. They are publicly criticized, and have little say in educational policy. Professional development activities should provide opportunities for teachers to feel they have a voice; in what is taught, how it is taught, and what they think and feel about it. NWP teachers all report a feeling that their voice matters and is valued.

- **Allow Teachers to Build Their Skills** - Teachers should be given the opportunity to build their own skills in an area for which they are developing as teachers. Professional development activities should build in time for practice and developing as a person before developing as a teacher. All of the NWP teachers expressed great power in spending time writing for themselves, and using their increased comfort with writing to drive their instruction of writing. This can be particularly powerful for elementary school teachers who are not considered to be content experts.

- **Use Local Experts** - Teachers resent when people come into their schools and tell them how to do their jobs, especially if those people are not teachers. Professional development planners should use the experts around them to help with professional development activities. Teachers, who have a passion or a skill for a particular subject, strategy, or aspect of teaching, should be asked to help develop the same in others. The money being spent to hire in experts and to pay for their travel expenses, can be used to
pay stipends for teachers to facilitate professional development. NWP teachers report the value of learning from people who “work in the trenches” like they do.

- **Strive for Transformative Professional Development**—Instead of teaching, or training teachers about how to use specific materials or implement specific programs, work on developing pedagogy. Teachers need to be involved in the process of identifying needs and problems and developing plans. Transformative teaching makes the distinction between transmission of knowledge as an entity and the active participation of learners, and what they contribute in knowledge and experience to the learning situation (Mezirow, 1996). These deep changes, as described by Sparks (2002) are necessary to affect teacher beliefs and assumptions about learning, teaching, and leadership that will result in achievement of student and adult learning goals.
References


Kemp, L.J. (2011). *Phenomenological study: The lived experiences of participants in the invitational summer institute of the National Writing Project* (Educational Specialist Thesis). Florida Gulf Coast University, Fort Myers, FL.


Appendix A

Letter of Invitation to Participate

June 27, 2012

National Writing Project TC’s,

My name is Laurie Kemp, and I am a National Writing Project Teacher Consultant; class of 2010. Currently, I am working on my dissertation to complete my doctorate at FGCU.

My dissertation seeks to shed light on what TC’s experience at the Invitational Summer Institute that sets it apart from other professional development experiences. It is a phenomenological study that asks the question: *What is the lived experience of participants in the Invitational Summer Institute of the National Writing Project?*

It is my intention to create a diverse sample group of TC’s with various levels of teaching experience, variety in teaching assignments and locations, and representing both genders and multiple ethnicities. Each of the participants will be given the opportunity to participate in one of three ways: (a) face-to-face focus groups; (b) phone interview; or (c) personal narrative.

Focus group members will be asked to attend three discussion group sessions for 1-2 hours each, where teachers will share openly with each other and the researcher (me), descriptions of their experiences at the ISI. The groups will meet three times at FGCU, or in a common agreed location in close proximity to a group of teacher participants.

Participants, who are not able to attend focus groups, may participate in a phone interview to be scheduled between the researcher and the interviewee. Individuals who are feel more comfortable sharing in writing, may submit a personal narrative of their experience.

Jackie Greene, Director of the National Writing Project at FGCU has submitted a letter of support from the NWP Leadership Team for the conducting of this research project. I hope you will consider becoming part of this study.

Attached is a basic questionnaire to assist my in selecting the most diverse group possible. If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email/letter and attach or paste in the questionnaire. I will contact TC’s to confirm participation and set up meeting times for the focus groups and phone interviews.

Thank you,

Laurie J. Kemp
Appendix B

TC Questionnaire for Phenomenological Study of the National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute

Name:

Gender: Ethnicity:

Year you attended the ISI: Years of teaching experience:

Is your current teaching assignment in public school, charter school, or private school?

Is your school suburban, urban, or rural?

What level or grade(s) do you teach?

What subject(s) do you teach?

Please check the type of participation in which you are interested:

_____ Focus Group  _____ Phone Interview  _____ Personal Narrative

Are you willing to meet once a week, for three weeks, for 1-2 hours at a time?

Are you willing to participate in recorded discussion groups?

Email _________________________________  Phone _____________________
Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Research Questions:

1. What was the experience of the Invitational Summer Institute of The National Writing Project like for you?

2. How, if at all, have you changed as a result of the experience?