

Teachers' Perceptions on Self-Directed Professional Learning in Newfoundland and Labrador

By

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### **Abstract**

To fill a gap in the literature with regard to teacher self-directed professional learning practices in Newfoundland and Labrador context, this qualitative study explored the experiences and perceptions that teachers have about professional learning programs and practices, with a focus on the role of teachers as adult learners, in the planning of such programs. For this purpose, this study employed a phenomenological approach to document and explore representations of the lived experiences of nine (9) teachers [four (4) male and five (5) female] through in-depth semi-structured interviews. These participants were teaching at the elementary, junior high, and high schools in the greater St. John's area, with one participant from Corner Brook. Based on the representations of the nine participants in this study, self-directed professional learning seems to be practiced by teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador, and the teachers interviewed say they are continuously improving their teaching skills through a variety forms of formal and informal learning strategies. The findings also show that the quality of professional learning programs seems to have improved. There is a reasonable balance between teachers' professional needs and the system's priorities in terms of teacher professional learning's contents and focus, and teachers feel they have been able to contribute to the planning of formal professional learning programs in a number of ways. The research also identified some challenges such as insufficient time; lack of facility or reluctance to use technology; lack of support, anxiety and isolation among learners, and; risk of low reward for invested time and effort. Recommendations for educational leaders and areas for further research are suggested.

*Keywords:* self-directed professional learning, teachers' professional learning, teacher education, adult learning, staff development, Newfoundland and Labrador

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**List of Abbreviations**

Department of Education	Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
NLESD	Newfoundland and Labrador English School District
NLTA	Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association

## **Chapter One: Introduction and Statement of Research Problem**

### **Introduction**

In response to the growing and changing needs of students, continuous professional learning is recognized as an essential part of a teacher's need to remain current in knowledge and pedagogy. As a result, professional learning can be considered as a cornerstone of systemic education reform efforts designed to increase teachers' capacity to maintain high standards of teaching (Smith & O'Day, 1991). One of the professional development approaches that has garnered considerable attention from educators is self-directed professional learning. This approach is based on the concept of self-directed learning, which is a pillar of the adult learning theory. The American adult educator, Knowles (1975) has described self-directed learning as:

[a] process by which individuals take the initiative, with or without the assistance of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. (p. 18)

Based on the self-directed learning concept, self-directed professional learning gives teachers the opportunity to gain control of their own learning based on their individual needs and transforms professional learning from a passive exercise to an active experience. The British Columbia Teachers Federation recognizes some of the characteristics of self-directed professional learning, including putting (a) teachers in charge of their professional learning activities, (b) promoting an individualized approach to professional learning, and (c) assisting teachers to plan professional learning based on their unique needs so that it can capture a variety of professional learning experiences, rather than a prescribed "one size fits all" professional

learning approach. Existing research has also suggested that self-directed learning can be highly cost-effective (Ellinger, 2004).

In the context of Newfoundland and Labrador, there have also been efforts to promote self-directed learning among teachers. For instance, in 2001, the Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation (CDLI) was established as a division of the Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education. One of the mandates of this Centre was to deliver online teacher professional learning to help teachers acquire the knowledge, skills and instructional practices needed to meet their own and students' evolving needs. This model of professional learning supports a focused, yet self-directed route towards teacher professional learning in Newfoundland and Labrador (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, n.d.b). Correspondingly, the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association (NLTA) emphasizes provision of life-long and ongoing professional learning opportunities for teachers and stresses addressing individual needs of teachers beyond initial curriculum implementation (NLTA, 2017, September).

To improve students' achievement in the province, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (the Department of Education) spends a considerable amount of money on professional learning programs each year. For instance, in school year 2017-2018, government spent \$5,463,000 for professional learning of teachers and this amount has been increased to \$7,066,600 in 2018-2019 budget year (Department of Education, personal communication, June 22, 2018). To prepare teachers for better performance in the classrooms, this amount of money is spent to update and develop the competencies of about 5200 teachers, who teach 66,323 students in 258 schools across Newfoundland and Labrador.

### **Significance of the Study**

Although there is a wealth of research about self-directed learning and teacher professional development generally, very little information is available on self-directed professional learning among teachers specifically, in the Newfoundland and Labrador context. The recently released report of the Premier's Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes, *Now is the Time* (2017), raised the issue of professional learning programs and made reference to the role of teachers in planning their professional learning practices (Collins, Philpott, Fushell, & Wakeham, 2017). This is an important area of inquiry; however, after reviewing the available literature published over the last two decades, I could find no studies that specifically focus on self-directed professional learning practices among teachers in the context of Newfoundland and Labrador.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research is to explore teacher perceptions of professional learning programs and practices in the education system in Newfoundland and Labrador, with a focus on the role of teachers as adult learners in the development and implementation of such programs. Through this research, I hope to contribute to the body of knowledge on teacher professional learning and potentially, to make recommendations in relation to improvement of current programs and practices.

### **Research Questions**

This study is guided by the following questions:

1. How do teachers represent their recent professional learning experiences?

2. What are the strengths of the current professional learning programs and practices in Newfoundland and Labrador? And how could professional learning programs be improved to better meet teachers' needs? And,
3. To what extent is self-directed professional learning practiced in Newfoundland and Labrador?

### **Choice of Terminology**

Although professional learning (PL) and professional development share the same ideas and goals for better performance and outcomes and both are intentional, continuing and systematic processes, the terminology professional learning reflects a modernized version that encourages professionals and teachers to seriously engage in their learning (Timperley, 2011; Western Governors University, 2017). It also demands teachers become active learners and self-developing professionals. To highlight the advantage of use of the terminology professional learning over professional development, Easton (2008, p. 755) argues that under the concept of professional learning "teachers will have to move from being trained or developed to becoming active learners." Since this view is in line with the focus of my study which is self-directed professional learning, I chose to use term professional learning, where applicable, throughout this paper.

### **Limitations**

The study was limited to nine participants' experiences and perceptions and their ability to assess professional learning programs. Although there was a mixture of experience from urban and rural backgrounds, not all areas were represented. As well, there were no participants from Francophone schools. While the perspectives of these nine participants add to the teacher professional learning research literature, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all

teachers' experiences and opinions about teacher professional learning across Newfoundland and Labrador.

Also, it was likely that some participants' anecdotes could have been recognized by other teachers as Newfoundland and Labrador has a small population of teachers. Therefore, the teachers may not have been willing to share some of their personal experiences and thoughts for the fear that someone might identify them through their stories. These limitations are likely to impact the findings and any application of these findings should be done with great care. Finally, despite my best efforts to bracket my biases and assumptions, it is possible that my own assumptions and experiences as a former teacher and vice principal created a bias that placed limitations on my analysis.

### **Outline of the Study**

This thesis is organized into five chapters. In Chapter 1, I introduced the study on teachers' perceptions of self-directed professional learning, described the significance of the study and the research purpose. In this chapter, I also outlined limitations of the study, choosing term professional learning over professional development, and the methodology utilized for conducting the research.

Chapter Two contains a review of extant literature relevant to the research topic. Here I provide information about teachers' professional learning organized around the themes that serve to provide a foundation and framework for this study. The themes addressed in this chapter include self-directed learning definition and features; self-directed learning from the perspective of adult education; self-directed learning from the perspective of lifelong learning; self-directed learning professional learning; key features of effective professional learning, and; standards for

professional learning; barriers influencing adult learning. Finally, I review teacher professional learning practices in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Chapter Three details the methodology for this qualitative research. In this chapter, I explain the use of phenomenology approach as the theoretical perspective for the research. I also present the research design and the procedures that were followed in conducting the study and the use of semi-structured interviews for collecting data from participants. Data analysis strategies and the issue of trustworthiness are explained in this chapter as well.

Chapter Four presents the research findings resulted from analysis of the data collected from the in-depth and semi-structured interviews with the research participants.

Chapter Five is the final chapter of the thesis. In this chapter, I provide reflective discussions and interpretations on the study findings and further explore themes arising from the participants' viewpoints in relation to both the research questions and extant literature. Also, this chapter discusses implications for practice, and suggests areas for future research.



## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

In this chapter I review the literature on self-directed learning and teachers professional learning/development. The literature review is organized around the following themes that serve to provide a foundation and theoretical framework for this study: self-directed learning definition and features; self-directed learning from the perspective of adult education; self-directed learning from the perspective of lifelong learning; self-directed learning and professional learning; key features of effective professional learning; standards for professional learning; barriers influencing adult learning, and; review of teacher professional learning practices in Newfoundland and Labrador. These sections contextualize this study by situating the research in a broader context. I have adopted a self-directed learning framework as part of adult learning theory (Manning, 2007) to gauge teacher-centered professional learning in this study.

### **Self-Directed Learning Definition and Features**

The literature on self-directed learning is broad in scope with historical roots. It is believed that self-directed learning was practiced by philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Descartes, and by historical figures such as Alexander the Great, Caesar and Erasmus, (Hiemstra, 1994). Hiemstra (1994) also reports that primary scholarly works on understanding self-directed learning can be traced in a publication by Craik (1840), who documented self-education in the United States and a self-help book by Smiles published in Great Britain in 1859. Some of the more well-known scholarly efforts for better understanding of self-directed learning were continued in the twentieth century by researchers such as Houle (1961), Knowles (1975) and Tough (1979).

Hiemstra (1994, p. 1) defines self-directed learning as “any study form in which individuals have primary responsibility for planning, implementing, and even evaluating the effort.” Knowles’ (1975) earlier work on self-directed learning provided foundational definitions and assumptions for subsequent research. He describes self-directed learning as

A process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the assistance of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identify human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. (p. 18)

Knowles (1975) also describes what he calls ‘other labels’ for self-directed learning such as self-planned learning, inquiry method, independent learning, self-education and autonomous learning. He argues that these labels cannot be used interchangeably with self-directed learning because these competing concepts imply that learning occurs in isolation, whereas self-directed learning can take place with the help of a range of facilitators, such as teachers, tutors, mentors, resource people and peers. The goal of self-directed learning, however, is to ‘learn how to learn’ without being taught (in a world that changes rapidly); to improve self-directedness in adults’ learning; to promote transformative learning, and; to stimulate emancipatory learning (Knowles, 1975; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Self-directed learning has also been described as autonomous and independent, whereby the learner takes responsibility for learning and self-reflection (Oh & Park, 2012). However, one of the more comprehensive summaries of the main features of self-directed learning was compiled by Hiemstra (1994):

- Individual learners can take more responsibility for various decisions associated with the learning endeavor;

- Self-directed learning is a continuum or characteristic that exists to some degree in every person and learning situation;
- Self-direction does not necessarily mean all learning will take place in isolation from others;
- Self-directed learners appear able to transfer learning, in terms of both knowledge and study skill, from one situation to another;
- Self-directed study can involve various activities and resources, such as self-guided reading, participation in study groups, internships, electronic dialogues, and reflective writing activities, and;
- Effective roles for teachers in self-directed learning are possible, such as dialogue with learners, securing resources, evaluating outcomes, and promoting critical thinking.

Several models have been suggested for self-directed learning. For example, Garrison's (1997; 2003) model introduces three overlapping dimensions for self-directed learning: self-management (task control, implementation of learning goals and management of learning activities, resources and support); self-monitoring (taking responsibility to self-monitor the learning process and construct meaning by integrating new ideas and concepts with previous knowledge); entering motivation (intention and reason to initiate and participate in an activity), and; task motivation (maintaining efforts toward learning outcomes). Song and Hill (2007) emphasize and highlight another dimension to the model of self-directed learning, that being the learning context and its impact on self-directed learning experiences in online settings. Table 1 summarizes some of the models of self-directed learning in the extant literature.

Table 1

*Summary of Different Models of Self-Directed Learning*

Perspective	Description	Models			
		Candy (1991)	Brockett & Hiemstra (1991)	Garrison (1997)	Song & Hill (2007)
Personal Attributes	Moral, emotional and intellectual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal autonomy</li> <li>• Self-management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goal orientation (personal attribute)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-management (use of resources)</li> <li>• Motivation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal attribute (resource use, strategy use, motivation)</li> </ul>
Process	Learner autonomy over instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learner control</li> <li>• Autodidaxy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process orientation (learner control)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-monitoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning process (planning, monitoring, evaluation)</li> </ul>
Context	Environment where learning takes place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-direction is context-bound</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social context: role of institutions and policies</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning context (Design: resources, structure, nature of tasks. Support: instructor feedback, peer collaboration)</li> </ul>

Adapted from Song &amp; Hill (2007)

Taken together, these dimensions have significant impacts on the process of self-directed professional development. As Table 1 shows, teachers may self-direct their professional learning by identifying learning goals, planning learning activities and use of resources, monitoring and evaluating progress and assuming responsibility for their learning in a context in which learning takes place.

### **Self-Directed Learning from the Perspective of Adult Education**

Knowles (1975, p.19) states that “the body of theory and practice on which self-directed learning is based has come to be labeled andragogy.” Andragogy is defined as the art and science of helping adults (or, maturing human beings) learn. Knowles, Houlton and Swanson (2005) observe six assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners:

1. The need to know. Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking it. Adults want to know what benefits they can gain from learning something new.
2. Self-concept: As a person matures his self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.
3. Experience: As a person matures he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.
4. Readiness to learn. An adult is more disposed to learn when he needs to know or do something. An adult is more willing to learn task-specific materials as they relate to their development socially and professionally.
5. Orientation to learning. An adult does not learn for the sake of the learning. He learns to perform a task or solve a problem. Therefore, his orientation toward learning shifts

from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem centeredness and he is focused on the application of knowledge the real world.

6. Motivation to learn: As a person matures the motivation to learn is internal.

Self-directed learning plays a critical role in adult education by promoting capabilities of adult learners as self-directed learners, or by fostering, facilitating and enriching adult learning (Marriam, 2001). Self-directed learning helps teachers, as adult learners, to gain necessary knowledge and skills beyond limited formal courses or professional learning workshops. Andragogy assumes that adult learners can direct their own learning based on their own experientially-based learning resources and the learning is driven by intrinsic motivation (Marriam, 2001).

### **Self-Directed Learning from the Perspective of Lifelong Learning**

The basic concept of lifelong learning is that learners cannot learn everything during formal education (school, college or university) because it is not feasible to equip learners with all the knowledge and skills they need to flourish throughout their lifetimes. Knowledge creation is also dynamic and cumulative. Therefore, learners will need continually to enhance their knowledge and improve their skills and competencies in order to address immediate problems (Sharples, 2000). Self-directed learning, according to Mocker and Spear (1982), is one type of lifelong learning practice that enables learners to remain current in the knowledge area of their profession and interest.

The European Commission (2002, p. 7) defines lifelong learning as “all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and or employment-related perspective.” From a career perspective, self-directed professional learning appears to be one of the significant parts of lifelong learning.

Professionals are expected to continuously update, extend and acquire new competencies so that they are better prepared to meet new developments and changes in the work place. Therefore, professionals need to become active learners who can identify their learning needs, and plan, implement and evaluate learning activities over working lifetime. In fact, Candy (1991) has argued that self-directed learning and lifelong learning are intertwined and reciprocally related to each other. On the one hand, self-directed learning is a crucial tool for lifelong learning, and on the other hand, self-directed learning is the aim of lifelong learning.

### **Self-Directed Professional Learning**

A general description of professional learning is any type of work-related educational experience that a person may acquire to improve his/her performance on the job (Mizell, 2010). Similarly, it refers to updating or building up job-related competencies that enable individuals to function effectively in their chosen profession (Minott, 2010). More specifically, in the profession of teaching, the goal of professional development is to help teachers to master the content knowledge and develop skills they need to be effective in the classroom and improve students' learning outcomes (Vrasidas & Glass, 2004). Professional development in the context of education is, therefore, appropriately defined as "a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers' and principals' effectiveness in raising student achievement" (Bradley, 2015, p. 3).

Researchers also seem to agree that a variety of professional learning activities will meet individual needs better than a 'one-size fits-all' approach. Teachers' professional and individual needs vary because of different career trajectories, learning styles, teaching areas, education levels and experiences. Therefore, there is no single professional development model to meet all

the needs of the teachers (Campbell et.al., 2017; Roy, 2003; Working Table on Teacher Development, 2007).

To meet teachers' needs, a variety of professional learning program options should be available for teachers including coaching, mentoring, job-embedded training, study groups, collaborative teams, individual projects, peer/expert observations and feedback, apprenticeships, and professional learning communities (Learning First Alliance, 2000; Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson & Orphanos, 2009).

Professional learning can take a variety of forms: formal, informal or variations of the two forms. Formal professional learning may include face-to-face training, distance learning and mentoring. These types of professional learning are structured, top down and usually guided by an instructor. In comparison, informal professional learning such as reading scientific publications, watching documentaries, conversation among colleagues, independent reading and research, or using professional learning websites is open-ended, flexible and self-directed.

Informal professional learning activities are probably more in line with teachers' personal and professional interests and individual needs (Beach, 2017). In fact, teachers themselves direct their learning in informal professional learning. Self-directed learning, as an informal form of learning, allows teachers to choose the objectives and the methods of their learning (Mocker & Spear, 1982). Therefore, self-directed professional learning is internally determined and initiated. It is defined as the professional development arising from the teachers' own initiative and will to learn (Lopes & Cunha, 2017; Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009).

Self-directed professional learning can give teachers the voice and the choice of what to learn, how to learn and when to learn to improve teaching and learning practices and keep up with students' needs and rapidly-expanding knowledge. Research studies have shown that self-



directed professional learning is a successful approach and has positive impact on the quality of teaching practice (Lopes and Cunha, 2017; Meng, 2014). Mushayikwa and Lubben (2009) also reported that self-directed professional learning seems to be most significant when teachers and other professionals are operating in deprived environments. In a study of self-directed professional learning program implemented for pharmacy students, Brown, Ferrill, Hinton and Shek (2001) argue that students who were not previously trained on how to manage and self-direct their own learning found themselves ill-equipped as practitioners of pharmaceutical care to keep abreast with the rapidly-growing pharmacy information. Brown et al. (2001) contend that commitment to an attitude of personal growth and life-long learning enables practitioners to keep up with rapidly expanding information and to reduce incompetence in their profession.

Some benefits of self-directed professional learning have been identified by researchers include encouraging a high standard of personal professional performance, improving personal efficacy, increasing job satisfaction (Alsop, 2008), preventing persons from becoming less competent as practitioners (Brown et al, 2001), improving confidence, providing opportunities practitioners to think about their performance (Grootenboer, 2009), addressing individual needs, empowering teachers, leaving knowledge creativity to the teacher, and promoting reflection (Minott, 2010; Weir, 2017). With respect to the driving force behind teacher's self-directed professional learning, it is argued that commitment to the moral purposes of teaching focused on equity and making a positive difference in children's lives is the main cause and motive for self-directed professional learning initiatives (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016; Tang & Choi, 2009).

### **Key Features of Effective Professional Learning**

Listing and describing the features that influence the effectiveness of professional learning is a complex task. According to Guskey (2003), in the literature, features of effective professional learning have been mostly studied from three perspectives over time: a) teachers' self-reports of professional learning features that lead to positive changes in their instructional practices, b) professional learning experts and researchers' opinions and recommendations on the best practices of professional learning, and c) from the perspective of the students' learning outcomes.

Features of effective professional learning can also be dependent on the purpose of professional learning. Considering that the ultimate goal of teacher professional learning is to improve students' learning outcomes, Killion (2012) has indicated three distinct purposes for professional learning as a part of a comprehensive system of professional learning:

a) to improve individual teacher effectiveness (emphasizing individual performance of teachers, addressing weaknesses and or building on their strengths); b) to improve school performance: (improving each school's capacity to provide schoolwide support to improve performance in the school), and; c) to implement programs and new initiatives (emphasizing the role of professional learning in supporting the implementation of specific curricula, instructional approaches, school reform programs, assessments, or technologies across adopting schools and teachers within the schools).

After reviewing 97 international studies on teacher professional learning and development, Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung (2008) introduced ten principles for teacher professional learning. In their view, factors influencing effective professional learning are 1) focus on valued student outcomes; 2) worthwhile professional learning content (knowledge and

skills); 3) integration of knowledge and skills; 4) assessment for professional inquiry; 5) multiple opportunities to learn and apply information; 6) approaches responsive to learning processes; 7) opportunities to process new learning with others; 8) knowledgeable expertise (engagement of expertise external to the group of participating teachers); 9) active leadership; 10) maintaining momentum (sustained and long-term approach to professional learning).

Given the variety in views on effective professional learning, providing a list of elements of effective professional learning, upon which all researchers and practitioners of this area agree, is not feasible. However, what I present here is a list of components that can be found in the extant research literature covering most of the features of effective professional learning.

In their study on professional learning of educators in Canada, Campbell et.al. (2017) identified three key components for effective professional learning and Collins et al. (2017) have referred to these components as pillars of effective teacher professional learning. These overarching components are quality content, learning design and implementation, and support and sustainability. Each component includes several features of effective professional learning that are summarized as follows:

1. Quality content: There are four key features under this component.

a) Evidence-informed: This feature indicates that the evidence informing effective professional learning should not be limited to student achievement on standardized tests but should also include use and adaptation of empirical evidence, teachers' performance evaluations, and data collected through teacher inquiries and learning assessment tools, as well as professional knowledge, expertise, and judgment.

b) Subject-specific and pedagogical content knowledge: This feature emphasizes that a focus on specific subject knowledge in combination with pedagogical content knowledge

is an important element of effective teacher professional learning programs. In other words, generic pedagogic strategies are insufficient. Effective professional learning programs should also include subject content knowledge to achieve their potential.

c) Focus on student outcomes: Effective professional learning is focused on student outcomes through creating relevance and links between the content of the professional learning and day-to-day experiences and teaching activities of teachers in the classrooms.

d) Balance of teacher voice and system coherence: Professional learning should not be exclusively top-down. In fact, effective professional learning also puts teachers at the center of their own and students' learning and gives them voice, choice, and leadership to direct their learning and engage in professional learning activities.

2. Learning design and implementation: This component includes three key features.

a) Active and variable learning: Teachers, like their students, have diverse learning needs which are influenced by the contexts of their work, career stage, professional priorities, personal preferences, their students' needs, and school contexts. Thus, teachers need access to multiple and varied professional learning opportunities and forms to learn new content, gain insights, and apply new understandings to their daily practices.

b) Collaborative learning experiences: This feature stresses that in order to have an effective professional learning there should be collaboration among teachers and administrators and within and across schools and systems, leading to professional learning communities. Collaborative learning experiences are opportunities to develop the collective efficacy of the teaching profession, not just individual talent development.

c) Job-embedded Learning: Effective professional learning occurs when teachers are not separated from school contexts and networks of peers and daily work-life. Job-embedded

learning is intended to provide authentic, contextualized opportunities for educators to engage in inquiry learning around the immediate work they do with their students in the school. School-embedded professional learning activities include professional learning networks, undertaking collaborative research on problems of practices, peer observation, and coaching.

3. Support and sustainability: There are three key features for this component.

a) Ongoing in duration: This feature highlights the importance of availability of time and continuous provision of programs for effective professional learning to occur. In other words, to improve teachers' performance and students' learning outcomes, professional learning programs need to be planned in a cumulative and sustained fashion and teachers need to be given time for involvement in professional learning activities.

b) Adequate resourcing: Effective professional learning need adequate resources, including allocation of budget, facilities, qualified personnel, learning resources, and time.

c) Supportive and engaged leadership: This feature describes the critical role of leadership in provision of effective professional learning for teachers. To have a sustainable professional learning culture, school and system leaders should be actively engaged in creating, encouraging, and supporting such a culture and providing coherent vision that helps teachers connect their learning to wider priorities.

### **Standards for the Professional Learning**

The features of effective professional learning are also summarized in the standards for professional learning. One set of standards – developed by the organization, *Learning Forward*, highlight the seven core characteristics of effective professional learning that results in positive

changes in educator practice and student's achievement. Learning Forward is a professional association, based in United States, devoted exclusively to educators' professional learning. The standards for professional learning, which are described below, provide guidance for planning, implementing, and evaluating effective professional learning programs (Learning Forward, 2011).

**Learning communities:** Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.

**Leadership:** Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning.

**Resources:** Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires prioritizing, monitoring, and coordinating resources for educator learning.

**Data:** Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students uses a variety of sources and types of student, educator, and system data to plan, assess, and evaluate professional learning.

**Learning Designs:** Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students integrates theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcomes.

**Implementation:** Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students applies research on change and sustains support for implementation of professional learning for long-term change.

Outcomes: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards.

These standards are designed to set policies and shape practice in professional learning and are a means for building collective responsibility among all educators for the success of all students.

In the context of Canada, standards for teacher professional learning have been embedded in general standards for the teaching profession in most provinces of Canada. For example, Ontario College of Teachers (2019) has included ongoing professional learning as one of the five Standards of Practice for the teaching profession in Ontario. This standard expresses the expectation that teachers will recognize that a commitment to ongoing professional learning is integral to effective practice and to student learning. Professional practice and self-directed learning are informed by experience, research, collaboration and knowledge. The other four Standards of Practice in Ontario are: 1) commitment to students and student learning; 2) professional knowledge; 3) professional practice; and 4) leadership in learning communities.

Similarly, in Alberta, the Teaching Quality Standard is described by six competencies: 1) fostering effective relationships; 2) engaging in career-long learning; 3) demonstrating a professional body of knowledge; 4) establishing inclusive learning environments; 5) applying foundational knowledge about first nations, Metis and Inuit, and; 6) adhering to legal frameworks and policies. Engaging in career-long learning, which means a teacher engages in career-long professional learning and ongoing critical reflection to improve teaching and learning, is the competency that focuses on teacher professional learning practices in Alberta. Achievement of this competency is demonstrated by the following indicators;

a) collaborating with other teachers to build personal and collective professional capacities and expertise;

- b) actively seeking out feedback to enhance teaching practice;
  - c) building capacity to support student success in inclusive, welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments;
  - d) seeking, critically reviewing and applying educational research to improve practice;
  - e) enhancing understanding of First Nations, Métis and Inuit worldviews, cultural beliefs, languages and values; and
  - f) maintaining an awareness of emerging technologies to enhance knowledge and inform practice
- (Alberta Education, n.d.).

In Newfoundland and Labrador, teacher professional learning is guided by the following three principles which state that professional learning:

- Occurs in collaborative, reflective communities where:
  - a shared vision, mission, and goals create high expectations for all;
  - collective responsibility is developed through collaboration, feedback and support;
  - individual responsibility is developed through data analysis, inquiry, and reflection.
- Is guided by student and teacher learning needs where:
  - data is examined to determine areas of need for students and teachers;
  - authentic learning experiences are designed to address needs;
  - new strategies are used and reflected upon to determine impact on student learning.
- Is designed to foster change in practice where:



- a differentiated learning experience is available to teachers through application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation;
- a variety of settings offer authentic opportunities for active engagement and collaborative learning;
- sustained learning and reflection is the norm (Department of Education, 2018).

### **Barriers Influencing Adult Learning**

According to research literature, there are a number of barriers and challenges that influence adult learning. These barriers can influence both formal learning and informal learning, including self-initiated learning activities by adults. Knowing these barriers might be helpful for better design of effective professional learning programs for teachers as adult learners. Barriers to adult learning can be categorized into two main groups of external or situational, and internal or dispositional (Falasca, 2011).

External barriers are those “influences more or less external to the individual or at least beyond the individual’s control” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 56). Some of the external barriers are:

- a) the effects of aging such as visual clarity, hearing loss, decline in learning speed, and decrease in knowledge retention ability (Falasca, 2011; Kennedy, 2003).
- b) changes in health conditions such as acute and chronic illnesses that indirectly effect learning ability in adults (Falasca, 2011; Kennedy, 2003).
- c) changes in social role such as family responsibility and work responsibility that result in lack of time to spend on learning and specifically on self-directed learning activities (Livingstone,1999).

According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999, p. 57), internal barriers tend to be associated with those which “reflect personal attitudes, such as thinking one is too old to learn”. One of the main barriers under this category is fear of failure. In most cases, adults do not involve in learning new subjects or skills because of the fear of making mistake or rejection by their peer group (Kennedy, 2003). In fact, being anxious and concerned about not being able to succeed in a new learning situation prevents adults from being able to initiate learning new knowledge (Falasca, 2011).

### **Review of Teacher Professional Learning Practices in Newfoundland and Labrador**

In the school year 2016-2017, 66,323 students were taught by 5,222 teachers in 258 schools across the province of Newfoundland and Labrador (Department of Education, n.d.a). Over the past decades, at the leadership and policy level, there have been a number of initiatives to improve teachers’ professional learning practices as part of broader education reform movements in the province. Based on the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Education in 1992 the Province created the Professional Development Centre.

Later, as result of work of Advisory Committee on the Coordination of Professional Development, the Province developed a set of professional learning principles and established a Professional Development Alliance comprising of the Department of Education, Faculty of Education, NLTA, Newfoundland and Labrador English School District (NLESD), and the Newfoundland and Labrador School Boards Association (NLSBA). In 2000, the Ministerial Panel on Educational Delivery in the Classroom recommended the following goals for the Professional Development Alliance;

- To develop a shared annual professional learning agenda;
- To develop a new model of professional learning institutes for teachers;

- To establish a system of recognizing participation in professional learning activities, giving consideration to incentives, awards and certification; and
- To develop alternate approaches to professional learning delivery (Sparkes & Williams, 2000).

However, both initiatives – the Professional Development Centre and the Professional Development Alliance – struggled to continue, mostly because of poor resource allocation and lack of clarity in the leadership role among the partner organizations (Collins et al., 2017).

The most recent attempt emanated from the Premier's Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes. The Task Force, which reported in 2017, examined K-12 education system and provided recommendations for the improvement of the education system in areas such as mental health and wellness; inclusive education; mathematics; reading; Indigenous education; multicultural education; co-operative education; early years education; and teacher education and professional learning (Premier's Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes, n.d.).

With respect to the professional learning leadership, the task force recommended that the five main educational agencies establish a consortium of professional learning with shared resources, responsibilities and leadership. The five leading organizations providing professional learning programs for the education staff in the province are the Department of Education, NLTA, NLESD, the Conseil Scolaire Francophone Provincial, and Memorial University's Faculty of Education. In its report, *Now is the Time*, the task force also raised concerns of teachers about the role of teachers in planning of professional learning programs in the province. According to the task force report, teachers want to be more involved in development of professional learning programs offered for them. Over time, professional learning has taken

various forms in the Province. These include stand-alone or “series” in-service and workshop sessions, conferences (provincial, national or international), study groups, job-embedded training, grade or subject level groups meeting (special interest councils) and professional learning communities (NLTA, 2017, January 27).

**School development model.** At the school level, professional learning is part of the school development model, which was introduced in 2004. The school development model is a systematic approach to bringing positive change at the school level. School development plans, which are developed within the context of both the provincial and the district strategic education plans, focus on continuous improvement of the school leading to the attainment of specific school’s goals. Professional learning (building capacity) is one of the fundamental parts of the model. Based on this model, teachers’ professional learning is recognized as an essential support component of the model to achieve school goals. Because this plan is developed and implemented at the school level, there is a greater chance to meet both school-based needs and teachers’ needs with respect to professional learning. Other components of the school development cycle are presented in the figure 1 (Department of Education, n.d.c; NLTA, 2017, January 27).

Figure 1. Components of the school development cycle



Source: Department of Education, n.d.c

**Annual professional learning days.** According to the NLESD policy and NLTA Provincial and Labrador West Collective Agreement, in Newfoundland and Labrador a maximum of five days is allocated for on-going professional learning of teachers and support staff to enable them to acquire the capacity required for students' success. Two out of these five days are optional and can be suspended if more than four instructional days are lost due to weather or other related closures during school year. Days for the instructional year are articulated and explained in the NLESD's administrative regulations as follows:

The length of the school year shall be 195 teaching days comprised of 187 actual teaching days, three (3) paid holidays, two (2) administration days, and three (3) professional learning school-shut down days, as per Article 28.01 of the NLTA Provincial Collective Agreement and Article 16.01 of the Labrador West Collective Agreement. Furthermore, the NLESD may approve two (2) additional school-shut down professional learning days which would reduce the actual teaching days to 185...each instructional day consists of five hours/300 minutes. (NLESD, 2017, p. 1).

It is useful to draw a comparison between Newfoundland and Labrador and other provinces in terms of number of teacher professional learning days to see where Newfoundland and Labrador stands amongst other provinces. Table 2 provides information about the number of non-instructional days, including professional learning days, and instructional days in eight Canadian provinces. Table 3 illustrates that British Columbia has the least number of non-instructional days (6 days) and the highest number of instructional days (190 days). After British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador and Nova Scotia have the least number of non-instructional days (8 days each) and the highest number of instructional days (187 days each). However, amongst the provinces, Quebec with 20 days has the highest number of non-instructional days and the lowest number of instructional days (180 days).

Nevertheless, with regards to the actual number of days of professional learning teachers receive, it seems there is not a significant difference between the provinces because the number of professional learning days is not static and it changes depending on each province's needs and conditions each year. That being said, it can be concluded that given the lesser number of non-instructional days in Newfoundland and Labrador (8 days), generally, Newfoundland and

Labrador's teachers have less opportunity of professional learning compared to Quebec, Alberta, and Prince Edward Island's teachers with 20, 15 and 14 non-instructional days, respectively.

*Table 2*  
*Non-instructional and Instructional Days in Eight Canadian Provinces*

Province	Number of non-instructional days including professional learning days	Minimum number of actual instruction days per year.
Newfoundland and Labrador	8 days: 3 days for professional , remaining for school development, the District priorities and paid holidays	187 days
Alberta	15 days: 3 teacher preparation days prior to students' first day of classes, 2 days for teachers' convention, 10 common non-instructional days (for activities such as parent/teacher/student conferences, professional learning for staff, appeals or organizational work)	183 days
British Columbia	6 days: 1 day designated by the Minister, remaining for teachers professional learning days	952 hours for grades 8-12 (190 days based on 5 hours a day)
Manitoba	10 days: 5 days for teachers professional learning, remaining for parent-teacher conferences, administration and pupil evaluation	185 days
Nova Scotia	8 days: For organizational and/or administrative purposes or for in-service training programs	187 days
Prince Edward Island	14 days: 3 days for teachers professional learning, remaining for parent teacher interviews, school goals day, annual convention, administrative, joint staff day, teachers' orientation	181 days
Saskatchewan	12 days: for teachers professional learning, staff meeting, teachers' convention, planning and orientation	183 days
Quebec	20 days (pedagogical days): teachers professional learning, meetings, planning at the school level, preparation, wrap-up and annual convention.	180 days

Source: Canadian Education Association (2018)

**Professional learning model.** In its vision for professional learning, the Department of Education has introduced a guiding principles framework for teacher professional learning in the province. Based on this framework, teacher learning is guided by three principles which state that professional learning:

- Occurs in collaborative, reflective communities where:
  - a shared vision, mission, and goals create high expectations for all
  - collective responsibility is developed through collaboration, feedback and support
  - individual responsibility is developed through data analysis, inquiry, and reflection
- Is guided by student and teacher learning needs where:
  - data is examined to determine areas of need for students and teachers
  - authentic learning experiences are designed to address needs
  - new strategies are used and reflected upon to determine impact on student learning
- Is designed to foster change in practice where:
  - a differentiated learning experience is available to teachers through application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation
  - a variety of settings offer authentic opportunities for active engagement and collaborative learning
  - sustained learning and reflection is the norm

Grounded on these principles, since 2009, the Department of Education has begun implementation of a professional learning model consisting of three modules/phases: Orientation, Exploration, and Investigation. In the orientation phase, teachers learn about the



content and philosophy of the new professional learning program through online platform developed for the program. This module can be completed individually or in a small group in May of each year.

Facilitated by a curriculum leader (e.g., grade level lead teacher, department head, program specialist), the second phase (exploration) is offered in face-to-face mode or virtually. In this phase, teachers are encouraged to explore, discuss and reflect on new concepts and on their own teaching and learning strengths and needs. Phase two is implemented in June of each year. Investigation is the last phase of the professional learning model. In this phase, teachers are provided with the opportunities to actively engage with the new content, pedagogy and resources and continue to work as colleagues within a professional learning community. This phase is also facilitated by curriculum leaders, usually in a larger group setting, early in the school year of implementation (Department of Education, 2018).

**Professional learning as a responsibility.** Professional learning is not only a need to be addressed by the educational authorities in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. It is also a responsibility of teachers as members of the teaching profession. According to the Components of Professional Practice and Expectations of Educational Professionals documents introduced by NLESD, teachers as professionals are recognized responsible for growing and developing professionally and they are expected to know that professional growth is a continuous and career-long process in order to stay informed, increase their skills and enhance student achievement (NLESD, n.d.a).

**Professional evaluation.** Professional evaluation is a mechanism designed by NLESD to foster continuous professional growth and development of teaching and learning staff and to make sure that all individuals take responsibility for improving the quality of education and

enhancing student achievement. Also, it is recognized that while effective performance appraisal is collaborative and self-reflective, it requires a focus on continuous professional growth and skills development of staff and identifies areas for improvement. According to the evaluation mechanism, all teachers' performance is formally evaluated once every five years, or as determined necessary by the Director. Professional appraisal of teachers is facilitated by the principal or assistant principal. (NLESD, 2014; NLESD, 2011).

**Professional growth plan.** According to NLESD (n.d.b), teachers' professional growth plan is developed annually by teachers in consultation with the school principal or designated in the spring. The plan outlines the teachers' proposed professional learning activities to enhance their teaching practices. A professional growth plan includes professional learning goals, strategies and timelines to achieve these goals, indicators or measures of success, methods to monitor progress and resources needed to achieve the goals.

To develop a professional growth plan, teachers can use Teacher Self-Assessment Form, Administrator Survey of Effective Teaching, Teacher Peer Questionnaire, the NLESD Strategic Education Plan, the School Development Plan, Component of Professional Practice, Expectations of Professionals, and internal and external student achievement data. Teacher professional growth plan also reflects teacher performance appraisal results. Identified areas of improvement during appraisal should be included in the teacher professional growth plan. The teacher professional growth plan can be used in the teachers' portfolio to highlight their successes. Teachers should report progress on their Professional growth plan and achievements two times during the school year (NLESD, 2014; NLESD, n.d.b).

**Towards teacher-directed professional learning.** From reviewing the literature on professional learning and development in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, there

appears to be a genuine effort to place teachers at the center of professional learning programs. According to the reviewed documents and policies, teachers are given opportunities and are expected to involve themselves more in the development of professional learning programs. For instance, the guiding principles framework for teacher professional learning for the Province recognizes teachers learning needs as one of the three principles of the professional learning. Likewise, teacher professional growth plan provides an opportunity for teachers to plan and communicate their own professional needs with the school principal and NLESD authorities.

These policies and others such as Newfoundland and Labrador school development plan, professional conducts including components of professional practice and expectations of educational professionals, advisory committees' recommendations and teacher collective agreements give some extend of autonomy to teachers in terms of their professional learning. Based on the content of these documents, I believe teachers are currently encouraged to initiate self-directed professional learning to some degree. Taking as an example, the professional learning model developed by the Department of Education supports self-directed route towards professional learning. In practice, however, teachers are still concerned about low level of contribution to the planning of professional learning programs despite existence of the above policies (Collins et al., 2017).

### **Chapter Three: Research Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I provide a detailed description of the methodology used in the study, including the research design, researcher roles and obligations, and the procedures used to conduct data collection and data analysis.

This study employs a qualitative approach (in-depth interviews) to document and explore teachers' perceptions of professional learning programs and practices in the education system in Newfoundland and Labrador, with a focus on the role of teachers as adult learners in the development and implementation of professional learning initiatives. Specifically, I chose a phenomenological approach to document and explore teachers' representations of their lived experiences as active participants in professional learning programs. As Creswell (1998) states, a phenomenological study attempts to uncover the meaning of the phenomenon for a number of individuals who have experienced it. The focus of phenomenological inquiry is to understand how people experience a particular phenomenon through the researcher's interpretation of those experiences (Van Manen, 1990).

In qualitative research, the researcher acts as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis and builds an understanding of a participant's lived experiences through an inductive process (Creswell, 1998). The purpose of qualitative research is "to understand the world from the perspectives of those living in it" (Hatch, 2002, p. 7), to comprehend the nature and form of phenomena, to unpack meanings, and to develop explanations or generate ideas, concepts and theories (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, p. 82),

## Research Design

Phenomenology comes from the academic disciplines of philosophy and psychology and is grounded in the works of philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, and Mach (Zeeck, 2012). In the contemporary sense, phenomenology is based upon the work of the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Edmund Husserl, which was then later developed by Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and others (Giorgi, 2012; Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2013). There are four general steps to undertake phenomenological research: (a) formulation of a question to focus the investigation, (b) data-generating where participants give a description of their experience, (c) data analysis where the researcher interprets the data generated and represents the meaning of the experience, and (d) presentation of the findings (Castro, 2003, p. 49). Padilla-Diaz (2015, p.103) describes three different classes of phenomenology as follows:

- a) Descriptive or hermeneutical phenomenology refers to the study of personal experiences and requires a description or interpretation of the meanings of phenomena experienced by participants in an investigation.
- b) Eidetic (essence) or transcendental phenomenology analyzes the essences perceived by consciousness with regard to individual experiences.
- c) Egological (genetic or constitutional) phenomenology refers to the analysis of the self as a conscious entity. This type of phenomenology appeals to universal consciousness.

Creswell (1998) suggests that the best criteria to determine when to use phenomenology is when the research problem requires a profound understanding of human experiences common to a group of people. Lester (1999) argues further that the purpose of the phenomenological approach is to explore and study a phenomenon through how people, who are involved in the situation, understand and perceive it. He goes on to say that phenomenology is concerned with

the study of experience from the perspective of the individual and bracketing taken-for-granted assumptions and usual ways of perceiving. In other words, as Gearing (2004) explains, through bracketing a researcher suspends or holds his or her presuppositions, biases, assumptions, theories, or previous experiences to see and describe the phenomenon as experienced and represented by research participants. I chose this approach because it allows me to explore and study the phenomenon of professional learning, which is a common pursuit within the teaching profession by asking teachers who are involved in the situation, how they describe, understand, and perceive it.

### **Researcher Positioning**

As the researcher, I am situated as a social constructionist; I believe that truth is constructed by individuals' interaction with their world. From an epistemological perspective, this paradigm emphasizes the importance of interpreting participants' perceptions of the meaning of an event (Lester, 1999). As Crotty (2003) posits, meaning is formed out of our engagement with our world. In other words, generation of meaning happens when a subject and object partner together. According to Baxter and Jack (2008), in social constructionism, truth is considered relative and dependent on one's perspective. In fact, social constructionism is built upon the premise of a social construction of reality which allows a close collaboration between the researcher and the participant, while enabling participants to tell their stories and the researcher to better understand the participants' actions.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue that in the constructionist paradigm, knowledge is created through interaction between the researcher and the respondents. A study based on a constructionist paradigm has the following characteristics:

- The researcher-respondent relationship is subjective, interactive, and interdependent;
- Reality is multiple, complex, and not easily quantifiable;
- The values of the researcher and respondents undergird all aspects of the research, and;
- The research product is context-specific (Zeeck, 2012, p. 76).

Based on these epistemological beliefs, phenomenology is an appropriate theoretical perspective for this study and interview methods are appropriate as a means of answering the research questions. As suggested by Padilla-Díaz (2015), in this phenomenological study my role as the researcher is to construct meaning out of lived experiences of teachers by conducting semi-structured individual interviews.

According to Connelly (2010) there are two main phenomenological approaches: descriptive and interpretive. In the descriptive approach, researchers are expected to bracket or put aside their presuppositions or biases about the subject of the study so they do not affect the study. The interpretive approach, on the other hand, recognizes that researchers cannot put aside their beliefs and biases about the subject of the study because beliefs and biases are part of the researchers; however, researchers should be aware of the potential for bias, and possible effects they may have on the study and reveal them. As Connelly (2010) suggests, researchers should be clear as to which approach they use. I chose to use an interpretive approach because as a former teacher and vice principal, I have experiences with professional learning programs. Therefore, I acknowledge that my past experiences might influence my interpretation of teachers' experiences with professional learning in Newfoundland and Labrador.

While acknowledging these biases, as the researcher who designed the study and performed data collection and analysis, and in keeping with Connelly (2010), I made every effort

to hear the voices of participants, interpret their representations accurately and ensure the findings reflect, as fully as possible, the experiences of teachers. As a researcher, I had an obligation to create a trusting, open, and respectful relationship with the research participants who voluntarily agreed to share their personal experiences and views with me. This respectful relationship was fostered by prior preparation, knowing enough about the subject under discussion, asking what I considered to be the right questions during interviews, and respecting participant stories and viewpoints (Walker, 2005).

### **Participants**

**Context.** Participants for this research project were recruited from teachers who were teaching in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, where I lived and studied. Participants were teaching in different school settings – elementary, intermediate, and high schools. The main criterion for selecting participants was experience with the phenomenon under study: professional learning programs (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 2007).

**Sampling.** A purposive sampling method was chosen for this study as it best served the purpose of the phenomenological research (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). Purposive sampling allowed me to include in the sampling frame, teachers who have had experiences relating to professional learning programming in Newfoundland and Labrador (Greig & Taylor, 1999). As Creswell (2015) suggests, when using purposeful sampling, a researcher needs to identify her/his/their sampling strategy. In this study, I applied two main strategies of purposeful sampling: maximal variation and snowball sampling.

According to Creswell (2015), in the maximal variation strategy, a researcher makes sure to present multiple perspectives of individuals to represent the complexity of the phenomenon through identifying a characteristic and then finding individuals who display different



dimensions of that characteristic. In this research project, the common characteristic was teachers' professional learning, which was studied through reaching out to teachers who had different perspectives and experiences about professional learning programs. This strategy was implemented before data collection to maximize variation in potential research participants.

Snowball (chain) sampling is the most frequently used method of sampling in qualitative research in different disciplines across the social sciences. It is sometimes used as the main vehicle through which informants are accessed (Noy, 2008). Patton (1990) describes snowball sampling as an approach for locating information-rich key informants or critical cases. By asking a number of people who else to talk with, the snowball gets larger as the researcher accumulates new information-rich cases. Snowball sampling, which occurs after a study begins, allows the researcher to ask participants to pass on research information to other information-rich teachers who might be interested in being part of the study (Creswell, 2015).

**Sample size.** A total of 9 participants were interviewed for this study. This number of participants fits with Creswell's (1998) recommended range of five to 25 participants for a phenomenological study and Morse's (2000) recommendation of six to 10 participants. In practice, this number was adequate because enough information was collected from these nine teachers about professional learning programs in Newfoundland and Labrador. Moreover, recruiting participants and collecting qualitative data was significantly time consuming so, time wise, interviewing more than this number would have taken the researcher beyond the scope of the study. Thus, interviewing nine teachers provided me the opportunity to collect in-depth details and enough data in a timely manner for the study and restraints of a Master thesis. For better representation and coverage, participants were recruited from different regions in Newfoundland and Labrador.

**Participants recruitment.** As described above, I applied two main strategies of purposeful sampling: maximal variation and snowball sampling (Creswell, 2015) to conduct this study. A combination of these two strategies helped me to identify and include participants with a range of viewpoints on teachers professional learning programs and to get access to information-rich informants. In order to maximize variation in potential research participant recruitment, the Faculty of Education's Graduate Society listserv for graduate students was used to circulate the information about the research project and call for participation. Similarly, a copy of the poster for recruitment of volunteer participants (Appendix A) was placed on the notice boards at the Faculty of Education. Also, the same copy of research recruitment poster was shared on social media platforms, particularly on Facebook, by the researcher and the researcher's friends. Despite these recruitment measures taken by the researcher, fewer teachers than expected expressed their interest for taking part in the research project. I attribute this to the timing of data collection, which, unfortunately, began close to the end of the school year.

Most research participants were recruited through the snowball sampling strategy. This sampling strategy relies on the researcher's and participants' existing professional and social networks. As Creswell (2015) recommends, I posed the request for recruiting volunteer participants through informal conversations with my professional network and asked participants, who had already been recruited through the maximal variation strategy, to invite teachers who met the characteristics of the sample and were information-rich about professional learning programs to contact the researcher.

After I received the expression of interest from teachers, I sent out an initial e-mail containing the informed consent letter (Appendix B) and other information explaining the interview procedures. After signing the informed consent letter, the interviews were conducted

in-person or by phone. Contact information of the participants, including email addresses and phone numbers were collected for future correspondence including sharing research results.

Although there was no quota set for gender, the recruitment resulted in a reasonable balance of male and female participants (4 males and 5 females).

Participants recruitment took much longer time than I expected. I intended to interview 10 teachers for this research project but after four months, I was only able to recruit nine volunteer teachers to interview. I started the recruitment process of the participants on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018, after the project was granted ethics approval on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018. After almost two months, the first interview was conducted on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018, while the last one was completed on September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018. One reason for this delay was that the recruitment process took place over the summer time when teachers were not as accessible due to travel and other commitments.

### **Data Collection**

**Individual interviews.** In the human sphere, the phenomenological approach normally translates into gathering deep information and perceptions through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions, and participant observation (Lester, 1999). Padilla-Díaz (2015) asserts that a profound interview is the most appropriate data collection strategy for a phenomenological research and suggests that phenomenological interview should be open or semi-structured.

Following these lines of thinking, semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews were conducted as the primary data collection method. Open-ended questions and sub-questions, based on the research purpose and guiding questions, were used to guide the interview process. As Creswell (2015) contends, the open-ended questions gave the participants the opportunity to voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research

findings and allowed them to create their own options for responding. The interview questions are provided in Appendix C.

All information supplied by the participants during the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The length of interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 60 minutes. All interviews were held in locations or through telephone or Skype, as determined to be convenient to the participants. All interviews were scheduled outside of the instructional day.

Interviews were informal and conversational in style. Following DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), the in-depth interviews were conducted in a personal and intimate manner through which open, direct, and verbal questions were used to obtain detailed narratives and stories. This approach helped in the generation of spontaneous follow-up questions in the natural interaction of the conversational flow. (Gall et al., 2007).

**Ethical considerations.** Participation in this research project was entirely voluntary and participants had the option to withdraw without a reason at any time during the interview and until data analysis had begun. Once data analysis had begun, however, it was not possible to remove individual data. Participants were advised of the potential risks and benefits to taking part in the study. During the interview, participants were told that they were not obligated to answer any questions that made them feel uncomfortable. To minimize any potential risks, no identifying information was used in the thesis. Participants signed an informed consent form. This research project was granted approval by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University of Newfoundland and by NLESD.

### **Data Analysis**

Hatch (2002) defines data analysis as “a systematic search for meaning [and] a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to others” (p.148).

In Creswell's (2015) view, data analysis is undertaken to form answers to the research questions through making sense of data. In this study, ongoing data analysis took place during interview processes as Creswell (2015) argues that in qualitative research, data collection and data analysis happen simultaneously. As Hatch (2002) suggests, starting data analysis early provides the researcher an avenue to direct future data collection based on past interviews. While analyzing the data, Vosloo's (2014, p. 362) general guidelines for data analysis presented below were useful:

- Noting patterns and trends. Do the trends, patterns, and conclusions make sense?
- Making contrasts and comparisons. Establishing similarities and differences between and within data set.
- Subsuming particulars into the general. Linking specific data to general concepts and categories.
- Factoring. Attempting to discover the factors underlying the process under investigation.
- Noting relations between variables by using matrix displays and other methods to study interrelationships between different parts of the data.
- Building a logical chain of evidence. Trying to understand trends and patterns through developing logical relationships.
- Making conceptual/theoretical coherence. In other words, moving from data to constructs to theories through analysis and categorization.

However, in order to analyze collected data and answer the research questions, I employed the proposed process of analyzing and interpreting qualitative data by Creswell (2015, p. 235-264) as a general guiding framework. I adjusted this process to the needs of this study. According to Creswell, there are six steps in data analysis: preparing and organizing the data for

analysis, exploring and coding the data, coding to build description and themes, representing and reporting qualitative findings, interpreting the findings, and validating the accuracy of findings. Although this process follows a relatively linear progression, it is an iterative and simultaneous process of data collection and analysis and steps are interrelated.

Step 1- Preparing and organizing the data for analysis: This step involved storing and transcribing the data collected through interviewing 9 participants and deciding on whether the data is hand or computer analyzed. In this step, spoken recorded information from interviews was converted to written and computer documents for analysis. To accelerate the transcription process, I started using a speech recognition software program called Dragon Naturally Speaking. However, it did not work well after several tries so I quit using it, and manually transcribed all interviews.

Step 2- Exploring and coding the data: Data analysis was begun in the second step. As mentioned, transcribed and organized information was read and reread thoroughly to explore the data in obtaining a general sense of the data, memo ideas, and think about the organization of the data. To make sense out of the text data, it was coded. In other word, I used labels to describe segments of the text. The coding process included dividing data into text segments, labeling the segments with codes, examining codes for overlap and redundancy, collapsing these codes into themes, and selecting specific data to use and disregard other data that did not specifically provide evidence for the themes. In fact, coding was an inductive process of narrowing data into a few themes.

Step 3- Coding to build description and themes: In the step three, I focused on developing themes. Themes are a core element in qualitative data analysis. Like codes, they are also labeled. Themes were developed based on the identified codes through eliminating redundancies and

based on the relevancy of generated codes to the research questions. In a narrative passage like the interview transcriptions in this study, elements of the themes included titles, evidence for themes, major and minor themes, and quotes to provide a voice of the participants.

Step 4- Representing and reporting qualitative findings: This step involved reporting findings based on the identified themes. I reported findings as a narrative discussion of themes in which I summarized, in detail, the findings from the data analysis.

Step 5- Interpreting the findings: Based on the research questions and extant literature, I made interpretations and discussed the research findings. Interpretations involved making sense of the data and forming some larger meanings about the phenomenon of professional learning. These interpretations consisted of advancing personal views, making comparisons between the findings and the literature, and suggesting limitations, future research, and recommendations for action.

Step 6- Validating the accuracy of findings (trustworthiness): To strengthen the accuracy and credibility of the findings, I used triangulation strategy as a tool to validate findings. Triangulation, in this study, was implemented through a method of data collection and document review. In this way, I collected data about a common phenomenon (professional learning programs in Newfoundland and Labrador) from perspectives of different teachers. Likewise, I drew information from different sources such as government and teachers' organizations policies and documents. In addition, I engaged in ongoing conversation with my supervisor about my results and my study. Plus, I compared the interview data with the literature that is applicable to this phenomenon. These strategies helped to strengthen the accuracy and credibility of the study findings.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

### **Introduction**

The overarching goal of this study is to explore teachers' perceptions about professional learning programs and practices in Newfoundland and Labrador, with a focus on the role of teachers as adult learners in the planning of professional learning initiatives. This chapter presents the research findings based on the analysis of data collected from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with research participants. The data analysis process is outlined in the methodology section in Chapter Three and is organized into three overarching categories corresponding to the three research questions: teachers' representations of their professional learning experiences; strengths of current professional learning programs and areas for improvement, and; teachers experiences and perceptions about self-directed professional learning.

Starting with summary of the participants, this chapter is organized according to these three categories, which represent dominant themes (and accompanying sub-themes) with supporting excerpts from the interview data. The themes, in fact, reflect and address the three research questions guiding the study: 1) How do teachers represent their recent professional learning experiences? 2) What are the strengths of the current professional learning programs and practices in Newfoundland and Labrador and how could professional learning programs be improved to better meet teachers' needs? and 3) To what extent is self-directed professional learning practiced in Newfoundland and Labrador?

### **Summary of the Participants**



The participants in the study were nine in-service teachers (4 male and 5 female) from across Newfoundland and Labrador. Interviews were conducted between August 3<sup>rd</sup> and September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Regarding the form of the interviews, three interviews were face-to-face, one was a written response to the interview questions, and the remaining five were telephone interviews. The length of the interviews varied from 30 to 60 minutes. The participants were a diverse group in terms of teaching experience and level of education. At the time of data collection, their teaching experience ranged from 3 years to 28 years. In terms of level of education, three had Bachelor's degree and the remaining six had Master's degree.

Most of the participants who took part in the study are teacher at schools in the greater St. John's area, with one participant from Corner Brook. Out of the nine research participants, four are situated at the elementary level, two are at the junior high school level and three are at the high school level. These teachers teach a variety of subjects including French, English, Social Science, Biology and Science, Physical Education, Music and all subjects at the elementary level.

### **Theme One: Teachers' Representations of Their Professional Learning Experiences**

The focus of this theme is how teachers represent their experiences and how they perceive the professional learning programs (sponsored by the school, school district, department of education and NLTA) they have attended over the course of their career as a teacher in Newfoundland and Labrador. Key findings relating to this theme are presented under six sub-themes: quality of professional learning programs, evaluation of professional learning programs, impact of professional learning programs on teachers' performance, professional learning days, support and resources available for teachers, and current professional needs of teachers.

**Quality of professional learning programs in Newfoundland and Labrador.** When teachers were asked to talk about the quality of professional learning sessions in Newfoundland and Labrador, their perceptions about the quality of professional learning sessions they had received varied. Generally, the teacher participants had a positive view about the overall quality of the training sessions – particularly the recent ones. They described it as “for most part generally positive, generally relevant” and “generally, pretty good; better in recent years.”

Some teachers, however, expressed their dissatisfaction with the quality of the professional learning sessions in which they had participated, particularly those from earlier in their teaching careers. For instance, Teacher A and Teacher E spoke about frustrating moments they had experienced in a school gym where they, together with hundreds of other teachers watched PowerPoint presentations with “no discussion” and “no real education”. Similarly, some considered some of the online sessions they had attended to be unprofessional and discouraging. One teacher noted,

You know, I am really left out from the Skype thing. I have been involved in a lot of online [sessions] and I feel left out. Six or eight teachers in St. John’s and they are talking about the movie and coffee and I am just sitting in there waiting for them get back on.

***Features of quality professional learning programs in Newfoundland and Labrador.***

The results also demonstrated some characteristics of quality and effective professional learning sessions from the perspective of the teacher participants. Some teachers stressed the importance of relevancy in terms of their professional needs as a teacher. As an illustration, a teacher said, “[Sessions] that I have found most beneficial were the ones really specific to what I do. So, you can take examples of what you have been given and apply them to the classroom the next day.” Another feature that emerged from the data analysis was that teachers found those training in

which they were active and engaged to be the most beneficial. One teacher phrased it in this way: “Professional learning [activities] where you can actually be part of something with someone else and learn from them hand in hand – those are the most effective ones.”

Moreover, the teachers I interviewed highlighted the point that they actually learned from those professional learning sessions that were hands-on and included real-life examples. This is evident from participant comments such as: “The most effective ones really give you, I guess, those particular scenarios and real-life situations and that kind of things.” and “I think for me it seems real-life examples of other teachers that work rather than just somebody standing and lecturing for an hour or two.”

**Evaluation of professional learning programs.** Analysis of responses to the interview question asking how the impact of professional learning sessions on teacher performance is currently evaluated showed that there was almost no follow up or impact evaluation of professional learning sessions on teaching practices in the classroom. The teachers mentioned that, after every session, they were asked to fill in a form asking questions about how they enjoyed the professional learning activity, whether or not they benefited from it and how it might be used in the classroom. However, based on the experiences of the majority of the research participants, the focus of those surveys was mostly on getting feedback from participants about the delivery of the training sessions rather than knowing actual effects of those training on teaching practices in the classroom. This was clearly described by a teacher who said: “That’s mostly evaluating that session and the instructor. I don’t feel like there has been any follow up as to how it actually impacted my teaching in the classroom.”

Likewise, some teachers reported the issue of lack of feedback and follow-up in relation to the teachers’ professional growth plan where teachers list their professional goals and propose

actions to be taken to meet those goals. To illustrate, Teacher H shared her experience, “What I am experiencing in my career, my professional learning was, as have been done, tick the box and that’s what I did. Nothing about discussion, about suggestions.” She also noted that this topic is deserving of attention, whereby somebody from academia should do a research project on the impacts of professional learning programs on classroom practices in Newfoundland and Labrador which she noted is currently a gap in academic literature.

Yet, some research participants also acknowledged that it would be very difficult for the Department of Education or NLESD to measure such impacts on teacher’s individual performance because, as stated by a teacher, “They are [as] understaffed as we are so they don’t have time and resources.” As a suggestion, some teachers wondered whether student grades, student scores on tests, and report card data could be used as a way of measuring the impacts of professional learning programs in general.

**Impact of professional learning programs on teachers’ performance.** In the previous section, findings concerning the extent to which the impact of professional learning programs were evaluated by the responsible organizations were presented. Under this theme, research findings on the impacts of professional learning sessions as experienced and stated by the teacher participants are described. When participants were asked about the extent to which professional learning sessions had a positive impact on their teaching practices, they expressed that workshops and sessions have had some level of positive impact on their performance.

Research participants cited the following examples as impacts of professional learning sessions:

- Improving methods of teaching curriculum;
- More efficient classroom control and management;

- Knowing how to deal with modern day challenges in the classroom;
- Knowing how brain works;
- Improving the amount of French spoken in the class;
- Knowing how new programs work and how to use new books and resources;
- Develop networking ability with other educators;
- Exposure to and learning about new ideas;
- Learning about the impacts of their own teaching; and
- Learning using new assessment instruments.

Talking about the impacts of professional learning programs, one teacher believed that all training sessions have a positive impact in one way or the other. She explained, “I think that any professional learning should be a positive one. If you approach it with a positive attitude, you will learn something.”

**Number of professional learning days.** In response to the question whether the 3 to 5 days allocated for teacher professional learning in Newfoundland and Labrador are both appropriate and enough, almost all participants said that a few more professional learning days would be more beneficial to the teachers. Although the majority of teachers did not suggest any specific number of days, one teacher mentioned that between 7 to 10 days would be more realistic to meet the needs of teachers.

The teachers, who proposed more days for professional learning, provided various reasons for their suggestion. For example, Teacher C reasoned that “with everything that is happening, the changes in technology are so dramatic, it’s hard just take 3 to 5 days in a year and expect teachers to develop understanding of the new technology.” Another teacher observed that “5 days might have worked if it was totally reflective of what teachers needed and what they are

choosing.” But according to the participants, in some cases, professional learning days were used for school-matter issues, such as school growth /development planning, school data review, and to compensate for snow days.

However, a few teachers stated that 3 to 5 professional learning days are enough if they are scheduled appropriately around teachers’ needs. For instance, Teacher E explained that “I feel like it is spread out enough and importantly, and it is staff-directed, because you put in your professional growth plan the types of things you want to do and they try to keep around those.” Interestingly, some teachers reported that some parents are not happy even with the current number of days for professional learning. A teacher shared her thoughts in this way: “It’s funny, I hear parents of students sometimes complain that there are too many PD [days].” The teachers had seen such complaints mostly on social media where somebody might be saying, “oh my goodness I have to get a baby sitter again” and “schools closed again today.” In the teachers’ opinion, parents’ complaints are mostly due to logistical issues on the part of parents.

#### **Support and resources available for teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador.**

During the interviews, participants were asked about the level of support and resources available to them in terms of professional learning. Some teachers stated that there is a lot of local support and resources for teachers to avail of for their improvement. Yet, sometimes there is a need to reach out to acquire other provinces’ resources as well. Besides the usual workshops and conferences, other examples of professional learning recourses available in Newfoundland and Labrador, according to the teacher participants, include online study materials, program specialist support, and financial support. Teacher B acknowledged that “I found that our school district usually has enough resources, but if I am looking for supplementary resources, I usually

look outside of our jurisdiction.” Teacher G shared her positive experience with her program specialist support at the NLESD as follows:

We do have program specialists who are at the Board [and who] we can contact with questions. And they are very good. You know, for the most part people that I’ve contacted; they are very good at getting back to me and answering my questions.

However, this same view was not echoed by all participants. For instance, Teacher H appreciated that availability of study materials is getting much better, however, she was direct in her comments regarding the level of support from her program specialist saying, “I don’t have support from program specialist in the Western Region. [H/She] is completely useless, [h/she] does not get back to you.” Even more critical, Teacher D emphasized both lack of access to resources as an issue and inconsistencies in support and resources. For example, she felt that there is a lot of support in Newfoundland and Labrador but it is not quite accessible to all teachers. She explained her view as follows:

There is certainly available professional development, you know, but the struggle is where is it? How accessible is it? Do you have to travel to get it? You know, is there [a]cost? So those are the struggles. I am a French teacher and you could attend a wonderful professional learning session in St. Pierre in the summer time for teachers but it costs money and your own time. So, can I attend? No, I have two small children so that’s the one I could greatly benefit but it is inaccessible to me.

Additionally, the issue of lack of sharing information about professional learning opportunities was evident from another teacher’s comment:

I think sometimes there are opportunities that teachers sometimes don’t know about because they don’t get passed on. I don’t know maybe if people, like principals, are

supposed to always pass on these opportunities. But sometimes I do get them through email; sometimes I don't. I think there are things that I would be very interested in but I just don't know that it's out there.

**Current professional needs of the teachers.** Participants provided their thoughts concerning the professional needs of teachers in response to an interview question asking about priority areas in which teachers need to develop their skills in Newfoundland and Labrador. The suggested professional learning priority topics by teachers were:

a) Assessment and evaluation. A teacher explained why it is still needed:

Even though I know that they have been doing more and more of that, I still think not everybody is quite comfortable in that area and the different ways of assessing and evaluating. I think sometimes just one professional development session is not quite enough.

b) Teaching strategies. The teacher participants acknowledged that they had seen this topic regularly appears in the professional learning sessions. However, they still thought there are a large number of teachers using an “old school type of teaching,” so there is a need of professional learning opportunities on “new teaching approaches and more hands-on teaching practices.”

c) Technology. The findings showed that professional learning in the area of technology is greatly needed. Specifically, that “the Google Classroom is the way that everything is moving [towards] regardless of what curriculum you are teaching” and the fact that “a lot of older teachers [are] getting frustrated with not really knowing what to do or how to find something”. According to Teacher D, “[t]he Google program needs a lot more professional development for



teachers to use it effectively.” Additionally, Teacher C described how inadequate professional learning in the area of teaching technologies might result in wasted efforts:

I give an example. They introduced something called Google Classroom maybe 5 years ago. And they really didn't do a lot of in-services on that. They didn't really bring it home to a lot of teachers and a lot of teachers are still lost with it. They give iPads or we buy iPads for the school without really showing teachers what you can do with an iPad. There are Chromebooks now in the library that nobody uses because a lot of teachers are like 'what I'm going to do with that,' you know. So, [the School District] fall[s] down; often technology arrives but they don't make it clear how it's applicable to a grade 2 teacher.

d) Inclusive education. One teacher indicated that implementation of inclusive education has been continuously challenging and therefore there is a continuous need for in-service in this area:

“Priority would definitely be inclusive education that is always struggle.”

e) Learning commons use. According to a teacher participant, professional learning session on learning commons would be very beneficial for teachers. She reasoned that they need to know what teacher librarians can offer them: “Teacher librarians can help them ... evaluate sources, find materials, use online catalogs, and write research paper, instead of reinventing the wheel every year.”

## **Theme Two: Strengths of Current Professional Learning Programs and Areas for Improvement**

This theme concentrates on the strengths and challenges of current professional learning programs in Newfoundland and Labrador. Throughout the interview process, participants were asked what they like and what they dislike about professional learning programs offered in Newfoundland and Labrador and what their suggestions are for improvement. The findings are

presented under three sub-themes: strengths of current professional learning programs, weaknesses of current professional learning programs, and suggestions for further improvement.

**Strengths of current professional learning programs.** To identify strengths of the professional learning programs in Newfoundland and Labrador, teacher participants were asked to describe the positive aspects of the training programs they had attended. In the following excerpt, Teacher F highlighted resource sharing processes among teachers during professional learning sessions as an important benefit: “So, examples of that would be, sometimes, it is as simple as a resource that somebody has shared with you in a session that you just take it in the classroom and use, or concept, website or sort of things.” Teacher E stressed that professional learning should be relevant to the teachers needs in the classrooms. She expressed the view that such sessions have improved in this way; “[t]he fact that it’s changed that there is more relevance to the classroom in terms of concrete examples and more conversations, interactions, group work, these sorts of things.”

Another positive aspect identified by the participants is the availability of more professional learning options to the teachers because of use of technology in delivering professional learning programs, especially for teachers in remote areas. Teacher D, for example, made the following observations:

Because of technology there is a lot more satellite sessions available via Skype and via online training you know ... So, there are more professional learning options available for teachers. Before you had to travel now you can attend the satellites ... And now certainly they are able to put them online and offer to teachers in remote areas or areas outside of the St. John’s.

Teacher F commented that use of technology has improved communication with teachers concerning professional learning programs. In addition, Teacher C felt that professional learning programs for teachers on how to use technology was a positive development while Teacher B underlined the positive work of the Department of Education in fostering professional learning:

I do like that they try to stay relevant to what is up and coming in the field of education. I do really like them trying to do their best to keep a finger on the pulse of what is happening, ups and flows in the education field.

Teacher A was impressed that professional learning had become more teacher-based and this was considered to be a great improvement over past iterations of professional learning programs that were considered to have been “super imposed on us.” Another positive aspect of the professional learning programs is that they are more interactive now. One teacher explained:

When I first started, there was always a hundred teachers and one animator who dictated to us much like a priest in a church. Now it’s turning into more interactive so there is someone up there and they get you to do activities whether with your group or on your own so you are not sitting and listening, usually there is less speaking on the part of animator and more active involvement in whatever is going on by the teachers. So, you can bring it to classroom more easily.

**Weaknesses of current professional learning programs.** The teachers were asked to share their thoughts and experiences about the challenges associated with professional learning programs in Newfoundland and Labrador. A new teacher mentioned that the process of applying for and receiving professional learning programs is not clear to the new teachers. He explained his opinion:

I guess the process of professional leaning that should be followed is not made entirely clear to newer teachers and I think they kind of assume that everyone knows how to apply for or how much you can have stuff like that.

Some teachers indicated that professional learning sessions are not always well organized. For example, Teacher F commented that “[s]ometimes it is just put together very quickly and sometimes is left up to the teachers themselves to present to us.”

Another negative aspect of the current model is the perception of a lack of follow up after completion of training programs, which left teachers “mystified” and “in the dark”. Teacher C provided following example to illustrate his view:

We got [Interactive] White Boards and we had a little bit of in-service but it was sadly lacking. And then came Google Classroom and there was a little bit of in-service but there was no follow up and there was no one to ask question and everybody was in the dark. I think unfortunately, [there] doesn’t seem [to be] a lot of follow up. There seems to be an introduction boom boom and then gone and we never hear from them again. For me it is a bit of problem.

With reference to online training, another weak point of the professional learning programs noted by some teachers was loss of sense of connection with other teachers even with the presenters in some virtual or online workshops because the online trainers are not adequately trained to teach virtually. To explain the issue Teacher H said:

There is a loss of connection with other teachers if you are doing it virtually or doing it online. Some of the people who are organizing online stuff, I think they need professional learning on how best to do that because they treat them as face to face workshops. So, there may be six or seven people present and they focus on those people like the big

screen is there and it's like you are being ignored. So, then you think I just want this done now or make a grocery list on piece of paper. They need to know how to organize online conferencing much better.

This teacher also emphasized that there is lack of a guideline for participants on how to treat online sessions and how to avail of them. "It wouldn't hurt to have a training guide for participants because I have seen people, you know, you can see they are texting whatever. You can see they are not focused on [the session]."

**Suggestions for further improvement.** The findings presented under this sub-theme are a result from the analysis of data collected in response to the hypothetical question which asks teachers if they had the opportunity to make changes or redesign the professional learning programs in Newfoundland and Labrador, what changes they would make to improve them.

Some teachers suggested that there was a need to increase the days for teachers training sessions, particularly with respect to new programs introduced by NLESD or the Department of Education. Teacher C reflected on this saying, "I think there could be more when they introduce new technology or ask teachers to review something often they don't have stake in it." Likewise, Teacher D echoed that "[f]or the most part we want to move on to the Google programs with very little notice and no professional learning. I think I had one professional learning day on Google since we started using that."

Another suggestion for improvement of the professional learning sessions was continuous and constructive follow-up. The teachers noted that following up after workshops motivate them to implement new programs in a more comprehensive manner. A teacher described how the the Department of Education or English School District can follow up and how lack of follow-up can be problematic:

To introduce something at once and walk away and not come back is a huge problem.

And I think that maybe professional learning should have a follow-up and there should be some constructive follow-up not just say how you doing. But here is the program that we introduced in September. These are the goals that you have to meet by January, what are you able to do with your Interactive White Board? What are you able to do with your computers? And I don't mean it to be policing I mean simply what are your needs now that you've tried it, where are your issues, what are the problems, what are your questions. They never do that so people are left. They basically give you some courses on how to swim and they throw you in the water and they leave and you might drown or you might swim. You might be struggling in the water and they have no idea and they don't seem to have any interest. I find that they never seem to know what is going on after they implemented a program.

To improve online training one participant suggested that online workshops need to be better designed and delivered. This includes providing professional learning sessions for instructors of online workshops on how approach and deliver online training, and having more synchronous online training. Other participants proposed more freedom for teachers in customizing a professional growth plan to meet their specific needs. They wanted to make professional learning programs more teacher-directed so that they get what they really need.

Another suggestion was to create a system/database where all teachers could register their areas of interests and then receive email notifications when there are upcoming professional learning opportunities that are relevant to those interests. Teacher B indicated that the advantage of such a system is that “[y]ou wouldn't get notified for every single thing because there are certain things aren't relevant to you.”

Teacher A suggested that mentorship programs and matching newer teachers with experienced ones for professional learning should be increased, especially for training on laboratory subjects. He stated:

I know there is a lot of young teachers out there. I know I send out packages all the time and they really appreciate them. But you know there should be conditions where they come in and hang out with us. When we have our professional learning day they should have their day and come watch us.

He continued:

We always have a mentorship program for young teachers at our school. So, that's really important. Supporting teachers in the first couple of years is huge because they have a lot to do. There is a lot to learn and they have a discipline problem usually because they are the ones going to be challenged by the students.

### **Theme Three: Teachers Experiences and Perceptions about Self-directed Professional Learning**

This theme represents teacher participants' experiences and thoughts about self-directed professional learning in the Newfoundland and Labrador education context. This theme addresses the research question which asks: To what extent is self-directed professional learning practiced and what forms of self-directed professional learning currently exist among teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador? The results are organized under six sub-themes. These themes include self-directed professional learning practices among teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador, teachers' motivation for self-directed professional learning, amount of time spent on self-directed professional learning, skills needed for self-directed professional learning, balance

between teachers' needs and system's needs; and challenges for self-directed professional learning

**Self-directed professional learning practices among teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador.** Teacher participants were asked to explain the current process of developing professional learning programs for teachers, explain how they make sure their individual needs are included in professional learning sessions offered to them, and provide examples of their self-directed professional learning experiences where applicable. The purpose behind these questions is to identify the role of teachers as adult learners in the planning of professional learning programs in Newfoundland and Labrador. Under this sub-theme, research findings from data collected in response to these interview questions are presented.

*Teachers role in the planning of formal professional learning programs.* The data analysis shows that teachers can contribute to the process of professional learning planning through teachers' professional growth plan. All teachers indicated that they update their professional growth plan every year. To elaborate, Teacher D described what goes into the plan:

We have to set our professional goals. We have to say how we are going to achieve those goals. What supports we would need to achieve them. And at the end of every school year we evaluate whether we have achieved them. And then we start all over again in September and create more professional learning goals.

Teacher E considered teachers' professional growth plans as a means through which the individual needs of teachers can be met because one can put his/her professional needs in the plan and NLESD tries to keep professional learning sessions around those needs.

However, some teachers believe that their professional learning priorities are not always consistent with what is available. Teacher E, for example, noted that "I guess, I feel like we are



having input into it but, sometimes again my goals are pretty specific and I am not going to get that from a generalized session.” Teacher A mirrored that sentiment noting that teachers can put their training needs in the growth plan, and if there are enough people requesting the same training, then the NLESD might bring somebody for that. Teacher C, nonetheless, acknowledged that it would be very difficult to meet every single teacher’s needs stated in the growth plan because their needs are diverse and different. He explained:

So, they [the School District] might use that [professional growth plan] as an idea or snapshot of what’s happening and what people are interested in but every teacher is totally different. I mean sometimes teachers are not interested in technology they are interested in reading or arts. So, it would be very difficult to call on those and find something that you could organize because it’s so diverse and so personal.

He also stressed that most of professional learning sessions NLESD offer are “in response of teacher’s demands and are really good because it brings you up to latest stuff about new programs and curriculum.”

In the opinion of some participants, teachers can also have a role in the planning of professional learning programs through the school development planning. In this regard, one teacher noted that “when developing [our] school development plan for the next year, there is consultation with teachers in terms of professional learning needs.” Another avenue where teachers can have a say in the planning of the professional learning days is the use of a professional learning bank that lists optional training available to the teachers. Teacher E observed that teachers can “choose” to attend those workshops that seem most beneficial to them. Teachers can avail of the bank of days individually or as group. For example, Teacher D

explained that as a department they planned a training day for themselves in one of those optional professional learning days:

I have had professional learning days where we go to principal and we say as department we feel we need to work on this. So, for example, one year we had to get together and discuss what we were doing for oral novel studies in each grade level.... So, we want to get together and just say how are you delivering it? How should we best test it? And how we should deliver materials to students? And what resources could we use? And that one was probably one of the best self-directed ones we've done and we came out of it like we were super productive because we were achieving and targeting exactly what we needed to improve.

***Forms of self-directed professional learning practices among teachers in***

***Newfoundland and Labrador.*** Research participants were asked to provide examples of their self-directed professional learning experiences to identify what forms of self-directed professional learning exist among teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador. The research results show that teachers take initiative and get involved in various activities in order to improve their knowledge and skills, and get job satisfaction. Most teachers reported that they use online resources for self-study about a topic of their interest. These online resources include journals and magazines, teacher associations' websites, Google Classroom, webinars, online courses and workshops, and online groups and forums. For example, Teacher C noted that he has "five online journals' that he reads. Additionally, Teacher B mentioned that he takes online courses and workshops such as the Google certification course. To explain further, Teacher D spoke about online learning resources that have facilitated communication and informal learning. For

example, she noted, “[t]hese new online resources allow for a lot of informal professional that teachers do on their own time through networking with other teachers.”

Another form of self-regulated professional learning indicated by the research participants was collaboration and learning from peers and colleagues. Some of the participants noted that this form of self-directed professional learning happens within professional communities, departments, and network of teachers. For instance, Teacher A and his department colleagues used action research as a means of self-directed professional learning to understand the impacts of their performance on the students’ learning. He explained:

We work together, we brainstorm, we develop new labs, we test our new ideas on the students so we are looking at the impact of our learning on the students learning and then from that we are learning back and that is where we are starting to become collectively reflective educators.

Another teacher stressed the significance of the networks of people. In her view, that is where one learns new ideas whereby s/he is able to correct and improve his/her current practices: “So, I often meet with other colleagues for coffee.... you know, you need that network of people; that’s the most important. That’s where you get the most ideas and the most feedback.”

Similarly, Teacher G provided an example on how she was able to learn about a topic through taking initiative on her own:

One [area] was assessment and evaluation. I knew I was not as comfortable as I wanted to be in that area. So, I contacted some other Kindergarten teachers and asked if anybody want to meet up. So, I contacted other teachers and we ended up getting together for a morning session kind of looking through the terminology like group referencing to

curriculum guide. So, that would be an example of something that I have done as self-directed learning.

Teacher D summarized avenues where self-directed, informal professional learning happens:

Teachers professionally learn from each other all the time even though it's not paid, even though we don't get time off but we have department meetings. That's professional learning. We have lunch at staff room and we are constantly asking questions each other what about this? And how did you do that? Did you read your test yet? How did you give your test? Or for example, we are in hallway saying you know I am struggling with this can we have a meeting for 5 minutes after school? And that's all professional learning but it's on our own time. So, we do a lot of professional learning on our own time even though it's very informal.

**Teachers' motivations for self-directed professional learning.** What prompts teachers to take initiative for developing their professional skills was an interview question asked from the teacher participants to identify the reasons and motivations behind self-directed professional learning activities among teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador. The teachers indicated various reasons, all centering on continuous growth and quality, including job satisfaction, maintaining teaching quality, and self-improvement. Teacher H said that job satisfaction is her main reason for doing self-study. She wanted to do the best possible job. Likewise, Teacher F said being better at what he does motivates him for self-directed learning. He then stressed offering better education for students as his primary motive saying, "[t]hat is your primary goal to have better education to improve yourself and then improve the chances and the options students have." Also, Teacher E pointed out that learning and developing itself is motivating and inspiring and makes one feel fresh so that is why she enjoys doing self-directed professional

learning. Additionally, the need to change and grow was considered as a main reason for Teacher G to be self-directed learner. He explained in this way:

I think that it's crucial that as teachers we need to continuously grow because classrooms are changing, dynamics are changing, curriculums are changing, everything is changing so we need to keep up with that. So, I think that it's absolutely crucial that we change and grow.

Teacher C mirrored that, for him, emerging needs drive self-directed learning because he needs “to deal with issues that [he has] seen in the classroom.”

Other reasons and motives for doing self-directed professional learning noted by the teacher participants include curiosity to find out ‘what’s going on out there’, salary incentives for higher certification levels, eagerness to learn and challenge one’s self, especially when official training does not meet an individual teacher’s needs.

**Time spent on self-directed professional learning.** The findings show that teachers spend a considerable amount of their own time on learning work related knowledge and skills. Table 3 provides information on the average amount of the time spent by teachers per week.

Table 3

Average Amount of Time Spent by Teachers Per Week on Informal Learning Activities

Teacher	Average hours spent per week	For
Teacher A	8	Membership in national science teacher association, reading Journals and magazines, twitting about science
Teacher B	3	Research articles
Teacher C	10	Reading online journals, watching videos
Teacher D	5	Meeting with colleagues, reading books for the courses
Teacher E	8	Preparations for school related activities
Teacher F	5	Preparation for school activities
Teacher G	15	Planning, looking up ideas, new ways of introducing curriculum
Teacher H	10	Collating research, reading journals online
Teacher I	5	Not provided

**Skills needed for self-directed professional learning.** Based on their experiences, the participants were asked to identify what kind of skills teachers should have to self-direct their professional leaning effectively. Most teachers indicated that the ability to identify and prioritize professional needs is one of the skills teachers should have. Another skill specified by the majority of participants was the ability to find and use information from valid resources.

A couple of teachers identified being self-reflective as a necessary ability for self-directed professional learning. Another indicated that good networking skills and the use of technology is useful for self-directed learners. Networking skills were also mirrored by Teacher D who said:

One of the things we did not get at the university was how to find other teachers. What to do if you really need help in an informal setting.... So [new teachers] need to know where else they can reach out, where they can reach a community of peers where they won't be judged, where they can look for resources, where they can ask for assistance on a level they are comfortable with.

To highlight the importance of the ability to use technology for teacher-centered professional learning, Teacher H said, "some [teachers] can't even navigate a webpage. Some of them can't operate the online devices like cameras. So, technical stuff." Additionally, another teacher mentioned time management as another skill crucial for self-directing professional learning activities.

**Balance between teachers' needs and the system's needs.** The teacher participants in the study were asked if they think there is an appropriate balance between what teachers say they need for professional learning and what is offered by the Department of Education and NLESD. The majority of participants expressed that in general there is a balance. In one teacher's opinion, there was a general alignment between what she saw as a need and what the Department of Education and NLESD tried to offer. While Teacher D believed that there is balance, she pointed out that sometimes both sides have to compromise. In her view,

The employer has to be able to say to the employee that we feel there is a need in this area and we as employees have to be able to say I as a personal individual teacher we need help with this.

Another teacher observed:

There are mandatory and optional training available for teachers. However, it is not always the case. There has been years that I have not received any optional training. You need to request it in advance.”

Similarly, Teacher F reinforced that the Department of Education and NLESD are aware of individual teachers’ needs. However, a few teachers held contrary views. Teacher C believed that teachers should be more in control of their professional learning. He used the metaphor of fisheries management and professional learning management to describe why professional learning sessions should be teacher-directed:

The more teachers in control of professional learning the better because you know nobody sitting in an office down on Water Street really know what teachers need in the classroom. So, it’s like our fisheries in Newfoundland was run from Ottawa, land locked, no water for years. It collapsed because there was nobody there that would understand how fisheries work. So, in the same way that fishermen need to be master of their own ship, teachers need to be master of their own classroom and any professional learning should be evolved from classroom needs.

Another teacher mirrored that

I think a lot of people out there they are not teachers, but think that they need to fix us while what they really need to do is to give us the opportunity to learn to teach better. We all, like everybody wants to do that, nobody wants to suck at teaching.

**Challenges for self-directed professional learning.** During the interview, teacher participants pointed out some obstacles and challenges for self-directed professional learning. A majority of teachers emphasized the issue of time. They said, “there is just no time” or “basically we would not have time” to spend on self-initiated learning activities. Another challenge



identified by the participants was family responsibilities. For instance, Teacher D said, “unless we are given the time during our working schedules to do so, it would be impossible for most of us to fit it in to our personal life.” Financial issues were indicated as another barrier because some courses cost money or a teacher has to “pay for child care or a substitute teacher in order to attend” a workshop or conference.

Other participants talked about lack of facilities or reluctance to use technology as a limiting factor in doing self-study. Teacher F believed that not knowing how to manage one’s learning could be a problem for many teachers and said, “[m]aybe they need someone to guide and direct them towards what they should study for individual self-improvements.” Some teachers expressed their concerns that self-directed professional learning may, in turn be unproductive or less rewarding in such circumstances. Teacher G explained in this way:

I think the self-directed ones, they aren’t always as efficient and informative as what they should be. It turned out yeah when it’s self-directed, it ends up being sometimes catching up on the work that you are behind them rather actually doing something new. I think they need to be more scheduled things handed out like here are some sessions that you can avail of. You know, sometime when you get together with other colleagues, that’s great but again it turns into a ‘oh my children doing this and that.’ It is great to share ideas but I guess sometimes it’s not as focused as it should be.

Another teacher noted that sometimes self-directed professional learning can be anxiety-provoking and frustrating because teachers may feel they are on their own with no guide and support. She described her feeling saying:

If you are not from a bigger city, then I can see have you would feel like I am just on my own. And, that has been like a few times I felt like that – especially when I was told you

that I was looking through this particular program. And ... I was trying to go to things ...I had no idea where to go. So sometimes you can be alone.

Recognition for self-directed professional learning initiatives is another challenge. For example, teachers wondered whether self-directed learning initiatives held any real value, from the perspective of NLESD. Teacher B indicated that “[t]here isn’t really a specific place on my profile” for that. Teacher D observed that it is very difficult to fairly and equitably measure self-initiated learning activities of teachers:

There is no way to really monitor how much time teachers put into their own professional learning informally during the week because it would be so easy for some teachers to lie or to say they had a meeting while they didn’t.

Teacher E mirrored this sentiment saying, “I don’t know how self-directed professional learning of teachers can be recognized by stakeholders.”

## **Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore teachers' perceptions about professional learning programs and practices in Newfoundland and Labrador, with a focus on the role of teachers as adult learners in the planning of professional learning initiatives. In this chapter I discuss the major findings presented in Chapter Four in relation to both the research questions and extant literature. I also discuss the significance of the study, implications of the research in relation to professional growth planning for consideration by decision makers and offer suggestions for possible directions for future research. Finally, I comment on the significance of the study and draw some general conclusions about how teachers represent professional learning programs and practices in Newfoundland and Labrador.

In this chapter, the discussions adhere to the organization of the preceding chapter with a similar focus on the three major themes and their sub-themes. These themes reflect the research questions of the study: 1) How do teachers represent their recent professional learning experiences?; 2) What are the strengths of the current professional learning programs and practices in Newfoundland and Labrador and how could professional learning programs be improved to better meet teachers' needs?, and; 3) To what extent is self-directed professional learning practiced in Newfoundland and Labrador?

### **Theme One: Teachers' Representations of Their Experiences About Current Professional Learning Programs in Newfoundland and Labrador**

In this section, I discuss research findings on teachers' experiences and perceptions about the professional learning programs in Newfoundland and Labrador on the topics of 1) Evaluation

and impacts of professional learning programs; 2) Professional learning days; 3) Support and resources available for the teachers, and; 4) Current professional needs of the teachers.

**Evaluation and impacts of professional learning programs.** Generally, the participants in this study were positive in their appraisal of the value of professional learning programs in the NLESD; professional learning is seen as having positive impacts on teaching performance in the classrooms in Newfoundland and Labrador. As detailed in Chapter Four, the research participants represented professional workshops and formalized learning sessions as valuable in helping to improve their teaching methods, classroom engagement, networking ability and collaboration with other teachers, and teachers' capacity to use new assessment instruments.

Although professional learning activities were seen to be effective, formal evaluation processes are lacking. The findings from this research raise questions about whether there is an adequate mechanism in place to continuously monitor and evaluate impacts and effectiveness of professional learning programs on teaching generally, and on individual teacher's performance, specifically. These findings are consistent with those of a 2015 external audit of NLESD and the Department of Education. At that time, the Auditor General of Newfoundland and Labrador reported that the Department of Education and NLESD did not always evaluate and monitor teacher professional learning programs in terms of their effectiveness and the extent to which overall program and sessional objectives were met. Beyond a few indirect measures of the effectiveness of such programs, such as the results of provincial, national and international testing and analysis of provincial student achievement data, there does not appear to be any systematic and targeted programs designed to evaluate the impacts of professional learning sessions on teachers' performance (Auditor General of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2015). This represents a weakness in the present approach to the professional learning enterprise and

signals a need to re-examine the mechanisms through which professional learning enterprise is monitored.

Earley and Porritt (2014) discuss what they consider to be effective approaches to measuring the impacts of professional learning, including (a) establishing impact evaluation practices that support both teacher performance and student learning, and (b) planning for impact by agreeing on expected outcomes for teachers and students during the planning of professional learning opportunities. Such approach requires a clear picture of what current teachers' practice and learning look like (establishing a baseline) and articulating a vision of how teacher practice and learning should look after professional learning activity (determining the expected impact).

**Number of professional learning days.** The issue of insufficient time has been identified as one of the barriers to effective professional learning for teachers (Gates Foundation, 2014; Campbell et al., 2017). The findings from these studies also found that, from the perspective of participants, the current teacher professional learning allocation does not seem to be adequate. In response to the question whether the 3 to 5 days allocated for teacher professional learning in Newfoundland and Labrador are appropriate and enough, teacher participants strongly disagreed and felt that the current allotment fell short of what was required. A comparison made in Chapter Two between the number of teacher professional learning days in Newfoundland and Labrador and some other Canadian provinces showed that Newfoundland and Labrador teachers have access to fewer professional learning days than teachers in other provinces such as Quebec, Alberta, Manitoba, and Prince Edward Island.

Several studies have identified a positive relationship between the amount of time spent on teacher professional learning and student achievement (Campbell et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). Effective professional learning should provide teachers

with adequate time to learn, practice, and reflect upon new strategies or curricula. The data presented in Chapter Four show that the participants in this study argued for more time for their professional learning. As one example, they referred to the topic of technology both as a professional need and as an example of an area where insufficient in-service training time has been allocated. As a result, teachers do not feel they are ready to use technology for the improvement of teaching and learning in the classrooms.

One of the main findings from this research, therefore, is that there is not enough protected time for professional learning of teachers. In order to maintain effective professional learning programming in Newfoundland and Labrador, it is important that either the number of professional learning days be increased or the current number of days be preserved and used in a way that is reflective of teachers' needs, rather taken up with meetings or other administrative tasks.

To improve the present circumstances, it is necessary that professional learning days be planned around teachers' needs and that sufficient time be provided to ensure teachers have the opportunity to learn and practice new methods or participate in other professional learning activities of their choice. This means that policy-makers need to rethink ways in which sufficient time can be identified and provided for the professional learning of teachers. One solution to the current limited number of professional learning days might be to offer more web-based training opportunities in concert with face-to-face professional learning. Given the large geography and sometimes severe weather of the province, online learning can be an option to make sure teachers always have access to the materials that they need over their career. Another option would be to increase the number of professional learning days to minimum of 4 (from 3) by increasing non-instructional days from 8 to 9. Of course, this change may have financial

consequences, either for the NLESD/government or the teaching force (or both) which may well be justified based on the anticipated improvement of students' outcomes. This option would require negotiation among the affected organizations involved in the delivery of education.

**Support and resources available for teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador.**

Sustaining professional learning outcomes in classrooms requires continuous support. To constantly grow, effective professional learning creates space for teachers through provision of required support and resources, such as allocation of budget, facilities, qualified personnel, and learning resources (Broad & Evans, 2006; Campbell et al., 2017; Collins et al., 2017). Regarding support and resources available for teacher professional learning in Newfoundland and Labrador, this study found that most teacher participants believe there has been an improvement in the level of support and resources and that current levels are adequate. These supports include online study materials, NLESD program specialist support, and financial support for conferences and workshops. These findings are consistent with changes in financial support for professional learning and teacher development in the province. As discussed in Chapter Two, the provincial teacher professional learning budget increased from \$5,463,000 in school year 2017-2018 to \$7,066,600 in school year 2018-2019.

That said, some research participants questioned accessibility to support and resources available in the education system, especially for the teachers who teach outside of St. John's area. This may signal some regional disparity and suggests a need for the Department of Education and the NLESD to review the ways professional learning supports and resources are developed and allocated if teacher-directed professional learning is to continue to be successful in all regions of Newfoundland and Labrador.

**Current professional needs of teachers.** Teachers' professional needs vary from teacher to teacher. Professional learning needs are highly individualized and depend on such variables as years of experience, level of education, grade level and subject area taught and location of teaching assignment. Despite this fact, the data analysis from this research revealed that teachers' main areas of professional needs are in the areas of (1) assessment and evaluation; (2) teaching strategies; (3) technology, and; (4) inclusive education. Some of these needs have been identified by earlier researchers. This study's findings reinforce the results from previous research in Newfoundland and Labrador context. For example, regarding inclusive education, Edmunds (2003) indicated that Newfoundland and Labrador' teachers were not prepared to implement inclusive education in the schools of the province. The same issue was reported by Barry (2016) who observed that in order to properly deliver inclusive education, teachers need support and training on strategies for implementation.

With regard to technology, in recent years, schools and school districts have made major investments; however, research shows that despite high levels of spending on technology, the expected transformation of teaching and learning practices in the classrooms has not yet occurred (Seifert, Sheppard, & Wakeham, 2015; Sheppard, & Brown, 2014). One of the reasons cited for this inertia is inappropriate preparation and training of teachers in integrating technology in their instructional processes (Sheppard & Brown, 2014).

The Sheppard and Brown's (2014) findings from this study suggest that although teachers have received training in the areas identified as important for professional learning, these experiences have been inadequate and they continue to be priority areas for teachers. This finding has two implications. First, it shows the importance of continuous support and availability of resources for teacher professional learning. And second, since teachers do not feel



confident enough in those areas the demand for additional training on the same topic might be due to insufficient time allocated for such training. This means when developing training programs, both time and support should be taken into account by decision makers in order to deliver effective professional learning programs.

### **Theme Two: Strengths of Current Professional Learning Programs and Areas for Improvement**

Participants were asked “What are the strengths of the current professional learning programs and practices in Newfoundland and Labrador?”. Analysis of responses to these questions provided the opportunity to find the positive aspects of professional learning programs from the teachers’ viewpoints and the extent to which the current teacher professional learning programs in Newfoundland and Labrador have the characteristics of an effective professional learning program as identified by experts and researchers in this area.

In their broad study on professional learning of educators in Canada, Campbell et al. (2017) identified three key components for effective professional learning (quality content, learning design and implementation, and support and sustainability). Collins et al. (2017) referred to these components as the pillars of effective teacher professional learning. To explain how current teacher training programs meet some of the features of effective professional learning, I matched the strengths of professional learning programs found in the current study with the components of effective professional learning identified in the research literature.

a) *Quality content is evidence based, has subject and pedagogical content, focuses on student outcomes, and meets teacher and system needs.* Under this component, the following strengths of the current professional learning programs in Newfoundland and Labrador are identified:

- Professional learning experiences are hands-on and use real-life examples;

- Professional learning experiences are relevant to teachers' needs in the classrooms; and
- Increasingly, professional learning programs are teacher-driven.

b) *Learning design and implementation engages teachers, and is collaborative.* This component is exemplified by the following identified strengths:

- Use of technology in delivering professional learning programs is making more professional learning options available to teachers;
- Resource sharing among teachers through professional learning sessions fosters collaboration;
- Professional learning experiences foster mentorship, 'on-the-job' training, and coaching
- Professional learning is becoming more interactive and engaging.

c) *Support and sustainability is ongoing, is resourced, and engages leaders.* This component's features correspond to the following stated strengths:

- More resources and support are available for teacher professional learning now than in the past;
- There is improved communication with teachers concerning professional learning programs;
- There is a focus on training teachers in use of technology in the classroom; and
- Professional learning experiences enable teachers to remain current on new developments in education.

Based on these comparisons, it can be argued that professional learning programs in Newfoundland and Labrador have most of the requirements and elements of an effective teacher professional learning program recognized by the researchers (Campbell et.al., 2017; and Collins et. al., 2017). However, this should be interpreted with some caution in terms of effectiveness of

professional learning programs as they lack some other requirements including adequate time and follow-up and appropriate mechanisms for evaluation and monitoring.

Some of these identified positive aspects of professional learning program in Newfoundland and Labrador reflect the characteristics of adult learners observed in adult education theory by Knowles, et al. (2005). Briefly, according to Knowles, et. al., there are six characteristics of adult learners: the need to know, self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn. Strengths such as relevancy of training to teachers' needs in the classroom, being hands on with real-life examples, and becoming more teacher based can be categorized under both readiness to learn and orientation to learning. Likewise, strengths such as becoming more interactive and engaging, and collaboration among teachers correspond to the role of an adult's experience as a foundation and source of learning that needs to be considered and utilized during training.

Conversely, teacher professional learning in Newfoundland and Labrador faces some challenges that likely decrease the degree of professional learning effectiveness. The following challenges were identified from the analysis of the data gathered in response to the question, "How could professional learning programs be improved to better meet teachers' needs?".

- The process of applying for and receiving professional learning programs is not always clear to newer teachers;
- In some instances, professional learning sessions were perceived as poorly organized;
- There were not enough professional learning days, or the days were used for purposes unrelated to professional learning;
- After completion of training programs there was little or no follow-up;

- In some virtual or online workshops the online facilitators were not adequately trained to teach virtually leaving the impression that some teachers were ‘disconnected’ from the group;
- Guidelines are needed for participants on how to effectively engage in online sessions.

Since virtual professional learning is growing, the implication of this study’s findings is that education authorities must reconsider the quality of their product and provide adequate training for instructors to ensure online professional learning sessions are as interactive and engaging as in-session workshops. Difficulties with on-line professional learning such as “poorly organized professional learning sessions” and “insufficient professional learning time” were highlighted in the NLTA’s submission to the Premier’s Task Force in January 2017. Similarly, with regard to the lack of follow up on training programs, the Auditor General of Newfoundland and Labrador (2015) reported that the Department of Education and NLESD do not monitor teacher professional learning to determine whether overall program and sessional objectives are met.

Also, in the same report, the Auditor General identified issues with the professional learning process, the identification and selection of topics, and the development of overall and sessional goals, which are consistent with the findings of this study regarding ambiguity of professional learning process especially for the newer teachers.

A comparison between the strengths and weaknesses identified through this study shows that generally the strengths of professional learning programs outweigh their weaknesses. A closer look at the weaknesses reveals that there are opportunities to redress these issues at the policy level such as negotiating additional professional learning days (or allocating more of them

for their intended use), following-up with participants after completion of training programs and improving advance planning in the development of professional learning programs.

### **General Overview of the Themes One and Two Findings**

Overall, the data analysis reveals that the quality of professional learning programs in Newfoundland and Labrador has improved over time and teachers tend to have a positive attitude about the quality of professional learning they have attended. This finding is consistent with the findings of Collins et al. (2017), who reported improvement in professional learning delivery in Newfoundland and Labrador. A general explanation for this improvement could be that the province's continuous efforts and investment in the examination of the education system have resulted in this positive change. Recent reports have also addressed the topic of teacher professional learning. The Newfoundland and Labrador Auditor General's review of teacher professional learning in 2015 drew attention to some concerns and establishment of the Premier's Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes in November 2016 resulted in development of Education Action Plan in June 2018 and an increase of 29% in the professional learning budget for the province.

These reports seem to have contributed to initiatives to improve professional learning programs; however, this does not mean that the professional learning programs do not have space for improvement. As indicated above, teacher professional learning still faces challenges that need to be addressed.

### **Theme Three: Teachers Experiences and Perceptions about Self-directed Professional Learning**

The main focus of this study was “To what extent is self-directed professional learning practiced in Newfoundland and Labrador?” Findings relating to the two other questions (How do teachers represent their recent professional learning experiences? and, What are the strengths of the current professional learning programs and practices in Newfoundland and Labrador and how could professional learning programs be improved to better meet teachers’ needs?) provide context for this question. I will first provide a general overview and context and then explore how self-directed professional learning is practiced in Newfoundland and Labrador based on the experiences and perceptions of the participants who were interviewed .

In this section, I discuss research findings on: 1) Teachers role in the planning of formal professional learning programs; 2) Forms of self-directed professional learning among teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador; 3) Teachers’ motivations for self-directed professional learning; 4) Skills needed for self-directed professional learning, and; 5) Challenges for self-directed professional learning.

**Teachers role in the planning of formal professional learning programs.** Despite some inefficiencies, the teachers who were interviewed say that they can meaningfully contribute to the planning of formal professional learning programs in several ways: through their professional growth plans; through school development planning; by proposing professional learning topics to the school administrator/department head; and through the professional learning bank that lists optional training available to the teachers. These avenues provide teachers with the opportunity to lead their professional learning by suggesting and choosing topics of their own needs or interest. When the teacher participants were asked if they think there is an appropriate balance between what teachers need for professional learning and what is offered by the Department of Education and NLESD, the majority of the participants felt that

there is an appropriate balance. In other words, the findings from this study show that in Newfoundland and Labrador teachers seem to be given adequate opportunities to be involved in the development of professional learning programs, organized by the Department of Education or NLESD, and receive workshops on topics of their interest.

This research conflicts with earlier studies completed by Sheppard and Anderson (2016) and Collins et. al. (2017), who reported an absence of teacher input into the professional learning topics and low contribution of teachers to the planning of professional learning programs. This contradictory result might be explained by recent improvement in policies and practices in the area of teacher professional learning since the earlier reports were released. It should also be noted that these findings were based on a qualitative methodology and a relatively small sample, so the findings cannot be generalized to the entire province, although they do provide an indication of the views of a small, randomly selected group of participants.

That said, it should be noted that professional learning is not merely for teacher development. It is essential to acknowledge that school development and system-wide improvement is as important as teachers' needs and development as the goal of both is to maximize student learning. The two are integrally connected: teachers have the most influence in the quality of education delivered to students, and their needs must be taken into account when designing professional learning sessions. This cannot be achieved unless teachers are continuously and actively engaged in the process of planning professional learning programs. In turn, such involvement increases sustainability and effectiveness of professional learning programs.

**Forms of self-directed professional learning among teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador.** In the previous sub-theme, I discussed how teachers self-direct their learning within

the formal system of professional learning. In this section, I deliberate on informal situations where teachers take responsibility of their own professional learning activities in order to improve their teaching knowledge and skills. The study revealed that teachers get involved in various informal professional learning activities on their own time out of need or curiosity. The main identified forms of informal self-directed professional learning among the teacher participants were:

- Online learning (journals and magazines, teacher associations' websites, Google Classroom, webinars, online courses and workshops, and online groups and forums);
- Collaboration with peers and colleagues (networking);
- Membership in groups and associations;
- Registering in graduate programs;
- Research projects (e.g. action research);
- Attending and presenting in conferences and workshops; and
- Day-to-day interactions (department's meeting, lunch-time meet ups, hallways chats).

Interestingly, it is quite noticeable that many of the identified self-directed activities in which teachers participate are consistent with formal teacher professional learning. It is different in terms of the extent to which teachers determine what and when to learn. Having said that, the types of self-directed professional learning activities revealed in the study are similar to the findings of other studies, in which it was found that teachers take initiative and engage in various ways of developing themselves as professionals (British Columbia Teachers Federation, n.d; Campbell et al., 2017; Govender, 2015).

Regarding the time spent on informal learning, teacher participants in this study say they spend on average seven hours of their own time on professional learning per week (the



equivalent of approximately five school days per month). Apart from summer time, this number can be at least equal to 45 school days per school calendar. This is consistent with OECD (2009) data on teacher professional learning where it was found that informal and self-directed learning was the most frequent professional learning activity undertaken by teachers in different countries. This type of activity not only contributes to teacher effectiveness, it has the effect of preserving professional learning resources. As Ellinger (2004) points out, self-directed learning creates a saving in the professional learning budget because teachers strengthen their teaching skills without being paid by the employers.

Research literature also showed a positive relationship between the number of hours spent on teacher professional learning and students' achievement. For example, Campbell et al. (2017, p. 47) identified that "contact hours of professional development (ranging from 30 to 100 hours in total) spread over six to 12 months showed a positive and significant effect on student achievement gains." That said, it can be concluded that teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador (with an average of 330 hours of informal professional learning per year) likely significantly contributed to the students' accomplishment on their own time and cost. Furthermore, in relation to practice, these findings provide insights about various forms of self-directed professional learning among teachers that can be informative and useful when planning support programs for teacher-directed professional learning in the Province.

**Teachers' motivations for self-directed professional learning.** Knowing that teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador engage in different forms of self-directed professional learning activities, raises the question of why teachers spend noticeable amount of time for this purpose. According to this research, there are both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations behind self-directed professional learning activities among teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador. Intrinsic

motivations included job satisfaction; enjoyment of learning and self-development; interest in self-improvement and drive; better teaching performance/pedagogy; and curiosity. Extrinsic motivations were identified as a need to change and grow (because classroom dynamics and curricula are changing); personal economic benefits; and concerns that formal teacher professional learning opportunities do not meet individual teacher's needs.

These results corroborate the findings of the previous work in this field. In a study on learners' motivational factors and self-directed learning aspects of informal learning, Song and Bonk (2016) found similar motivations. While interest in the topic, curiosity, and need for information were identified as the main reasons, among others, the majority of participants indicated job satisfaction, and delivering better education to the students as their primary motivations for self-directed professional learning. Similarly, Beatty (2000) found the intrinsic satisfaction of the work itself, and feeling of making an impact as the main characteristics of self-directed professional learning experience among teachers in Ontario.

Comparing the identified teachers' motivations for self-directed professional learning with the official system-directed professional learning goals shows that there is a great deal of alignment between the two. According to NLESD's view, the overall goal of professional learning is "maintaining a highly qualified workforce and achieving desired student outcomes" (Auditor General of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2015). With this in mind, it would be fair to say that this is similar to what majority of teachers want from self-directed professional learning, that being self-improvement and delivering best possible education to the students.

One implication of these findings on day-to-day teachers' practices is that teachers are highly passionate about their profession and they want to excel in their job. The ways they

represent their main motivations for self-directed learning and the time and effort they put into delivering quality education to their students demonstrate this passion.

**Skills needed for self-directed professional learning.** In this sub-theme, I discuss the skills teachers identify as being necessary for effectively leading their own professional learning initiatives. The main self-directed professional learning skills found useful by the research participants were:

- Ability to identify and prioritize professional needs;
- Ability to find and use information from valid resources;
- Self-reflection;
- Networking;
- Ability to use technology; and
- Time management.

Again, these findings are consistent with what is found in the literature. For instance, the British Columbia Teachers Federation (n.d.) underlined reflection and collaboration as required abilities necessary to develop a meaningful teacher professional learning plan. Likewise, the Centre for Teaching Excellence at the University of Waterloo (n.d.) highlighted similar skills for success in an independent study. Some of these skills include (a) life skills (organization of time and resources and co-operation in working with others), (b) information skills (ability to find information by using libraries, abstracts, community resources, online resources, and by interpreting data, charts, tables and timetables), (c) basic skills (literacy, numeracy and computer literacy), (d) analytical skills (ability to select and use most effective means of acquiring information, ability to analyze and organize information, and ability to select the most relevant and reliable information sources), and (e) evaluation skills (ability to self-evaluate their current

situation and needs, collect evidence of accomplishments, and accept constructive feedback from others). These skills largely overlap with the skills identified in this study.

Overall, it is crucial for teachers to know how to effectively direct their learning. In other words, learning how to learn is vital to keep up with rapid new developments in the teaching profession. This is evident in a study by Brown et al. (2001) on self-directed professional learning program for pharmacy students. They found that those students who were not previously trained on how to manage and self-direct their own learning found themselves ill-equipped to keep abreast with the body of rapidly-growing pharmacy information.

It should also be noted that making sure teachers have the right skills to guide their professional learning is a shared responsibility among pre-service teacher training institutions, in-service training providers, and most importantly, teachers themselves. Such skills are not only useful for informal learning situations, but they are also vital for benefiting from formal learning opportunities.

**Challenges for self-directed professional learning.** During the data analysis, some of the challenges identified by the participants for teacher-directed professional learning in Newfoundland and Labrador were:

- Lack of time;
- Family responsibilities;
- Financial issues;
- Lack of ability to use technology;
- Anxiety, isolation and lack of support; and
- Risk of low reward for invested time and effort.

The challenges observed for self-directed professional learning among teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador mirror those of the previous studies that have examined the obstacles and challenges coming along the way of self-directed professional learning. Song and Bonk (2016) found comparable obstacles, such as lack of time, monetary issues, lack of quality resources, and lack of self-motivation. Fear of failure, a barrier identified by Kennedy (2003), can be paralleled to the “anxiety, isolation and lack of support” obstacle of this study’s findings. According to Kennedy, in most cases, adults do not get involved in learning new subjects or skills because of the fear of making mistakes or being rejected by their peer group. However, what is important is that knowledge these barriers might be helpful in a) providing professional learning programs for teachers that account for these obstacles, and b) improving policies and guidelines to better support individual teacher’s efforts for improving his/her teaching skills.

### **General Overview of the Theme Three Findings**

Knowles (1975, p.19) defines adult education as the “art and science of helping adults (maturing human beings) learn.” Being independent and self-directed human being are two of the enabling characteristics of adult learners. As Marriam (2001) contends, adult learners can direct their own learning based on their own experientially-based learning resources and the adult’s learning is driven by intrinsic motivation. Teacher self-directed professional learning is defined as professional learning arising from the teachers’ own initiative and will to learn (Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009; Lopes & Cunha, 2017). To explain this, we can borrow from Knowles (1975) and describe teacher self-directed professional learning as a process through which teachers take the initiative, with or without the assistance of others, to identify their professional learning needs, set learning goals, identify resources for learning, choose and implement appropriate

learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes. Self-directed professional learning, in fact, gives teachers the freedom to choose what to learn, how to learn, and when to learn.

Many of the findings of the current study can be explained within the concept of self-directed learning. The research findings show that, for the majority of the teacher participants interviewed in this study, self-directed professional learning is mainly internally driven. The study shows how teachers identify their professional needs, what resources and forms of learning they choose to improve their teaching skills, and how they use self-reflection as a way to evaluate their learning. These findings overlap strongly with the main elements of self-directed learning.

From the perspective of lifelong learning – defined as “all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and or employment-related perspective” (European Commission’s, 2002, p. 7), – the teachers interviewed for this research give all the appearances of lifelong learners. This is evident from the considerable amount of time they say they spent on informal professional learning activities during a year and their passion and motivation for self-development.

However, while the adult education literature acknowledges that adults can lead their own learning based on the life experience and previous knowledge, given the identified skills required for effective self-directed professional learning, teachers as adults still need support and guidance. These findings suggest that self-directed professional learning is obviously more effective and beneficial if teachers have appropriate skills. Moreover, the data demonstrates that not all teachers feel comfortable with the idea of self-directed learning. Given that the new approach to professional learning is to make it more teacher-directed in the province, policy makers may wish to consider these limitations in professional learning policies and practices.

Furthermore, because teachers serve as role models for their students, it is important that teachers feel confident in self-directing their own learning as well. These findings support the culture of learning models where responsibility for learning resides with teachers. In fact, teacher self-directed professional learning is a strong vehicle to create and foster a culture of learning in schools that can transform them into robust learning organizations where the staff constantly learns new skills and grows professionally.

Finally, the findings on self-directed professional learning have implications for the design of training programs in terms of sustainability of those programs that are useful and beneficial to the teachers but cannot be continued due to limitation of resources (financial or human resources). By that I mean, when we plan a new training program where there is likely to be significant take-up we can, as an option, include training of the program participants on how they can lead their own learning and those of their colleagues even after the program is complete. Given the availability of online learning technologies and the fact that teachers already spend a significant amount of time on informal learning, this can be considered as an option for sustainability of popular programs.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, I have developed the following recommendations. Recommendations are being made into two categories: recommendations for teacher professional learning stakeholders and recommendations for future research.

**Recommendations for the providers of teacher professional learning programs:** The following recommendations are provided based on the results of this study. These recommendations might be useful for decision makers to more effectively support and help teachers grow professionally.

- Increasing professional learning time: Given that Newfoundland and Labrador's teachers have fewer formal professional learning days as compared to some other provinces in Canada, additional professional learning days would be beneficial to teachers' professional learning especially when a new program is introduced. This might involve some give and take on the part of the educational authorities who fund and partially determine how professional learning days are deployed and the organization representing teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador, the NLTA.
- Continuous and constructive follow up and feedback: It is highly recommended to establish a follow-up mechanism to all formal professional learning initiatives, in order to strengthen the effectiveness of the professional learning programs by motivating teachers and keeping them engaged well beyond the actual training session.
- Online training efficiency: As the Department of Education and NLESD provide more online training options, it is strongly recommended that great care should be given to more real-time and interactive online workshops. Better design of programs and better training of instructors on how deliver online training and how to effectively interact with online learners is imperative. Similarly, providing guidelines for teacher participants would improve the efficiency of online training.
- Supporting teacher self-directed professional learning: This study found that teachers spend more significant amounts of their own time on self-directed professional learning compared to official teacher professional learning time. However, teachers should be offered guidance on how to more effectively direct their self-directed learning. Examples include provision of training on skills required for successful self-directed professional learning through in-service and pre-service teacher training. Given that, according to the



Department of Education policy, Vision for Professional Learning, teacher professional learning is moving towards more teacher-centered, self-directed professional learning; therefore, teachers should not feel like they are isolated.

**Recommendations for Future Research:** Due to the limitations of this study's scope and methodology, the following research topics merit further research:

- Recognition of self-directed professional learning: One of the challenges mentioned by the participants was the issue of recognition of teacher self-directed professional learning for salary increase or certification purpose.
- Evaluation of professional learning programs impacts on students' achievement in Newfoundland and Labrador: Although this study found that formal professional learning had a positive impact on teaching practice, the current study also found that as self-directed professional learning seems to be widely practiced among teacher participants in Newfoundland and Labrador, it is not always as efficient and informative as what it should be. Therefore, one area for research could be how self-directed professional learning has impacted quality of teaching and learning and students' achievement in Newfoundland and Labrador.
- Self-directed professional learning model: During the interview, some teachers mentioned about the lack of self-directed professional learning model for teachers to follow it. This can be a meaningful area of research given that teachers spend considerable amount of time on informal professional learning.
- This study was limited to a small group of teachers' perceptions and experiences about self-directed professional learning. Further studies on perceptions of school

administrators, NLESD officials, and NLTA professional staff about teacher-directed professional learning will add more insight into this topic.

### **Significance of the Study and Conclusion**

In this study, I tried to address the three research questions in the context of Newfoundland and Labrador:

1. How do teachers represent their recent professional learning experiences?
2. What are the strengths of the current professional learning programs and practices in Newfoundland and Labrador? How could professional learning programs be improved to better meet teachers' needs? And
3. To what extent is self-directed professional learning practiced in Newfoundland and Labrador?

Despite the limitations, the findings of this study have important implications for the understanding of current professional learning programs' strengths and challenges and particularly self-directed professional learning practices among this group of teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador. This study contributes to filling the gap in the research literature about teacher self-directed professional learning practices in Newfoundland and Labrador.

During this study, it was found that although the quality of professional learning programs has improved over time in Newfoundland and Labrador, still there are challenges, including insufficient time for teacher professional learning and lack of follow up and feedback. Findings of this study show that teachers believe there is an appropriate balance between teachers' professional needs and system's priorities in terms of professional learning contents and focus. Technology and inclusive education were found to be still dominant need areas for

teacher professional learning. Also, it was found that support and resources are available for professional learning purposes, but they are not quite enough and accessible to all teachers.

Teachers' voice and choice are often mentioned in the literature on teacher professional learning. In the context of Newfoundland and Labrador, this study found that teachers have adequate opportunity to have input in the planning of formal professional learning programs in the province. More noticeably, it seems that self-directed professional learning is practiced by teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador. The teachers interviewed in this study say they spend in excess of 300 hours per year of their own time on informal work-related learning. Teachers' self-directed professional learning was driven by a commitment to the moral purposes of teaching as their main motivations for self-directing their professional learning are job satisfaction and students' improvement. Time, family responsibilities and limited ability to use technology are some of the challenges teachers identified for self-directed professional learning.

This study found that teachers, as lifelong learners, continuously improve their teaching skill through various forms of formal and informal learning strategies, including online learning, collaboration with colleagues, research project, and day-to-day interactions at their workplace. This is in line with the provincial policies (e.g. Education Action Plan) that encourage teachers to initiate self-directed professional learning. However, what remains crucial to the success of these policies is that teachers receive the support they need. This means they should be provided with necessary training, resources, and opportunity to network and learn with other teachers, and they should be convinced that teacher-directed professional learning does not add more work and responsibility on them rather it helps them to more conveniently and effectively address their professional needs in this changing and challenging profession.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Poster for Recruitment of Volunteer Participants

#### *Research Study: Self-directed Professional Learning*

If you are grade 1 to 12 teacher at a school in Newfoundland and Labrador, and if you are interested in discussing and sharing your opinions and experiences of the successes and challenges of teacher-directed professional learning programs in Newfoundland and Labrador, you are being invited to participate in a research study on the topic of Teachers' Perceptions of Self-directed Professional Learning in Newfoundland and Labrador. This research will offer you an opportunity to reflect on your professional learning practice and contribute to the body of knowledge on teachers professional learning in Newfoundland and Labrador. I am conducting this study for my Master of Education degree under the supervision of Dr. Gerald Galway at the Faculty of Education at Memorial University.

The purpose of this research is to explore teachers' perceptions of professional learning programs and practices in Newfoundland and Labrador, with a focus on the role of teachers as adult learners in the development and implementation of such programs. Self-directed professional learning goes beyond the conventional professional learning methods and programs. In this process, the teacher identifies the need to acquire more knowledge and takes initiative to learn and develop his or her skills.

Participation in this study is voluntary and will require about 30 minutes of your time. The individual interview session can be scheduled either at Memorial University, at your school, or at another location of your choice. If you wish I can also conduct the interview through Skype or telephone. Following the arms' length procedures recommended by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR), participation in this research project will not be reported to the school administrator(s), any NLESD officials or any faculty members at Memorial University, including my supervisor. Also, no interviews will be scheduled during instructional time.

If you would like to take part in this study or have any questions about the research project, please contact me via email at mbakhshi@mun.ca or by phone at (709) 769-0059. If you



know another teacher who may be interested in participating in this study, please ask them to contact me.

Thank you

Mohammad Ali Bakhshi

This research project has been granted approval by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) at Memorial University of Newfoundland and by the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District (NLESD). If you have ethical concerns about this research, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at [icehr.chair@mun.ca](mailto:icehr.chair@mun.ca) or by telephone at (709) 864-2861, or Office of the Senior Education Officer (Human Resources), NLESD at (709) 758-2391.

**Appendix B: Informed Consent Letter****Informed Consent Form**

Title: Teachers' Perceptions of Self-directed Professional Learning in Newfoundland and Labrador

Researcher: Mohammad Ali Bakhshi  
Master of Education Student (Educational Leadership Studies)

Telephone number:  
Email address: mbakhshi@mun.ca

Supervisor: Gerald Galway, PhD.  
Associate Professor  
Telephone number: (709) 864-2522  
Email address: ggalway@mun.ca

You are invited to take part in a research study on the topic of Teachers' Perceptions of Self-directed Professional Learning in Newfoundland and Labrador.

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you a basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in this research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

**Introduction:**

This research project is being conducted by Mohammad Ali Bakhshi, a Master of Education student at the Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland as part of Master's thesis under supervision of Dr. Gerald Galway.

**Purpose of Study:**

Although there is a wealth of research about self-directed learning concept and teachers' professional learning generally, little information is available on self-directed professional

learning among teachers specifically, in the context of Newfoundland and Labrador. The recently released provincial government report by the Premier's Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes, *Now is the Time* (2017) raised the issue of professional learning programs and made reference to the role of teachers in planning such programming. This is an important area of inquiry; however, to date, there has been very little research on teacher-directed professional learning in the Newfoundland and Labrador context. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore teacher perceptions of professional learning programs and practices in the education system in Newfoundland and Labrador, with a focus on the role of teachers as adult learners in the development and implementation of such programs.

**What You Will Do in this Study:**

If you agree to participate in this research project, you will be asked to participate in the interview where you will be asked to recount and share your perceptions and experiences with respect to teachers' professional learning in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

**Length of Time:**

It is expected that each participant take part in an interview session approximately 30 to 45 minutes in length.

**Withdrawal from the Study:**

Your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary and you will not be penalized or adversely affected in any way should you withdraw from the study. You may withdraw at any time during the interview or until data analysis has begun. You are free to withdraw participation in the study without having to give a reason. If you choose to withdraw during or after data collection, the collected data (your interview transcript) can be removed from the research data upon your request. Once data analysis has begun, however, it will not be possible to remove your individual data. I anticipate data collection and transcriptions to be completed by September 25, 2018 and analysis to begin immediately after this date.

**Potential Benefits:**

This research will contribute to the research literature on teacher professional learning and will make information available that could lead to adjustments and improvements to teacher professional learning programs and practices in Newfoundland and Labrador.

**Possible Risks:**

There is little to no risk involved with participating in the study. During the interview, you are not obligated to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. To minimize any potential impact, no identifying information will be used in the reports and publications and you

will be given an opportunity to review and comment on the transcript of your interview, prior to data analysis.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential to safeguard participants' identities from unauthorized access, use or disclosure. Research records will be kept in a locked office, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. Only the researcher will have access to the collected data. The researcher will not include any information in any publications or presentations that would make it possible to identify you. The research project supervisor will have access to only anonymized data.

**Recording of Data:**

Interview sessions will be audio-recorded and transcribed. After your interview, and before the data are included in the final analysis, you will be able to review the transcript of your interview, and to add, change, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit.

**Use, Access, Ownership, and Storage of Data:**

Data will be kept for a minimum of five years, as required by Memorial University's policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research under the property of the researcher. The collected data will be kept on a password-protected hard drive. Only the researcher will have access to the collected data. After five years, the collected data will be destroyed.

**Reporting of Results:**

Upon completion, my thesis will be available at Memorial University's Queen Elizabeth II library, and can be accessed online at: [http://research.library.mun.ca/view/theses\\_dept/FacEducation.date.html](http://research.library.mun.ca/view/theses_dept/FacEducation.date.html). The researcher may also publish the research results through an article in a scholarly journal and in the local Teachers' Association Bulletin.

**Questions:**

You are welcome to ask questions before, during, or after your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact Mohammad Ali Bakhshi via email, [mbakhshi@mun.ca](mailto:mbakhshi@mun.ca) or phone at (709) 769-0059 or research project supervisor, Dr. Galway via email at [ggalway@mun.ca](mailto:ggalway@mun.ca) or phone at (709) 864-2522.

**Ethic Approval**

This research project has been granted approval by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) at Memorial University of Newfoundland and by the Newfoundland

and Labrador English School District (NLESD). If you have ethical concerns about this research, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr.chair@mun.ca or by telephone at (709) 864-2861, or Office of the Senior Education Officer (Human Resources), NLESD at (709) 758-2391.

### Consent

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You participate in this research project voluntarily.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that it will not be possible to remove your individual data after August 15, 2018 when I anticipate beginning data consolidation and analysis.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw participation in the study without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You agree to be audio-recorded  Yes  No
- You agree to the use of direct quotations (you will not be identified)  Yes  No

By signing this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

### Your Signature Confirms:

- You have read what this study is about and understood the risks and benefits. I have had adequate time to think about this and had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered.
- You agree to participate in the research project understanding the risks and contributions of my participation, that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation.
- A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to you for your records.

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Signature of Participant

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Date

### Researcher's Signature:

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

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Signature of Principal Investigator

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Date

**Appendix C: Interview Questions****Interview Questions****Research Question 1: How do teachers represent their recent professional learning and professional learning (PL) experiences?**

1. What does the terms professional learning mean to you?
2. What are your thoughts on the quality of professional learning opportunities available to you?
3. To what extent have the professional learning sessions in which you have participated had a positive impact on your teaching practices and your students' performance? Provide examples if any.
4. Is the number of professional learning days enough? What is your suggested number? Do you know how many days are in other province for professional learning?
5. How do schools / school district evaluate their professional learning offerings in terms of their effect on student learning and continuous teacher improvement?
6. How can you explain the steps required for receiving a training as a teacher?
7. What is your take with respect to support available for teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador in terms of resources for professional learning. Do you refer to other jurisdiction, teachers association for finding the information you need?
8. Have professional learning programs offered for teachers changed over the course of your career and if so, in what ways?
9. What are the current priority professional learning needs of teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador?

**Research Question 2: What are the strengths of the current professional learning programs and practices in Newfoundland and Labrador? How could PL be improved to better meet teachers' needs?**

1. What do you like about current professional learning programs and practices? What are some of the strengths of the way professional learning is currently operationalized?
2. What do you dislike about current professional learning program and practices? What are some of weaknesses or challenges to effective professional learning?

3. If you had the opportunity to make changes or to redesign professional learning programs and practices, how would you redesign them?

**Research Question 3: To what extent is self-directed professional learning practiced in Newfoundland and Labrador? What forms of self-directed PL currently exist?**

1. How would you define self-directed professional learning in your language? What does self-directed professional learning look like for you?
2. When you think about self-directed professional learning, what kinds of activities or programming come to your mind?
3. Talk about some of your experiences with self-directed professional learning, if any. To what extent do you feel the professional learning opportunities you have been involved in are self-directed?
4. What prompted you to become involved in self-directed professional learning?
5. How do you make sure your individual educational needs are included in professional learning opportunities offered through your school or through NLESD, Department of Education or NLTA?
6. What options are available to you if professional learning programming offered by your School or NLESD or by other agencies such as the Department of Education or NLTA do not meet your individual needs?
7. Do you think there is an appropriate balance between what teachers say they need and what offered by the Department of Education, NLESD, and NLTA?
8. What would you like stakeholders (Department of Education, NLESD, school administrators, other teachers) to know about self-directed professional learning?
9. You as teacher, how do you identify your needs for professional learning?
10. As teacher, are you ready for self-directing your professional learning?
11. How Department of Education/NLESD or NLTA can recognize teachers' self-directed professional learning?
12. How many hours do you spend on informal learning activities related to your work per week?