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Perceptions and Attitudes of General and Special Education Teachers Toward Collaborative Teaching

Garletta D. Robinson
Walden University

Walden University

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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Garletta Robinson

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Dr. Kathleen Claggett, Committee Member, Education Faculty
Dr. Mary Howe, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer

Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University
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Abstract

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MA, Walden University, 2011

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Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

In a Georgia middle school, general and special education teachers expressed concerns about the challenges of working collaboratively in the inclusive classroom. Effective teacher collaboration is pivotal to ensure academic success of all students. The purpose of this qualitative bounded instrumental case study was to explore middle school teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward shared teacher collaboration in inclusion classrooms. Lave and Wenger's situated learning theory was the conceptual framework. Purposeful sampling was used to select 4 general and 4 special education teachers who worked in middle school coteaching classrooms. Face-to-face interviews and teacher lesson plans were the data sources. Data were analyzed using inductive analysis and open and axial coding strategies. Teachers identified ongoing training emphasizing coteaching models, collaboration, and classroom management strategies, coplanning periods, teacher selection guidelines for inclusion classes, and administrative involvement in collaboration as challenges of and optimal opportunities for working collaboratively. Based on these findings, a 3-day professional development project was designed to support effective teacher collaboration and foster positive communication with administration teams. These endeavors may contribute to positive social change when administrators establish and cultivate a school culture of positive teacher collaboration between general and special education teachers involved in coteaching, thereby improving teachers' coteaching experiences and improving the academic environment for all learners.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to my amazing husband and best friend Darrell Robinson. You were my anchor and inspiration throughout this entire process. You, along with our daughters Jasmine and Chelsie assured me that I would reach the finish line, and I did.

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I am extremely grateful for the never ending love and support that I received from my life partner and husband Darrell Dwayne Robinson. God has blessed me with an angel on earth in the form of you.

I am also thankful for the participants who allowed me to document their experiences and passion for being an educator. In addition, I am encouraged by the newly formed relationships that transpired while completing this journey.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my phenomenal Committee Chair, Dr. Kimberley Alkins. There will never be enough words for me to express what your support and encouragement have meant to me. Thank you forever.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

Effective teacher collaboration is essential in establishing a culture of school

success aimed at meeting the demands of a diverse group of learners. To ensure effective

teacher collaboration, individuals who work together in the local schools must possess

the knowledge, skills, and disposition to collaborate (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain,

& Shamberger, 2010). Such skills are especially critical when general and special

education collaborative teachers are mandated to work alongside each other on a daily

basis in the same instructional setting.

The local problem addressed in this study was the challenges general and special

education teachers face when working in a collaborative setting to assist diverse student

learners at a local middle school. In this case study, I addressed general and special

education teachers' attitudes and perceptions of collaboration, as well as optimal

opportunities for enhancing the collaborative or inclusive relationships within the

instructional setting. In Section 1, I discuss the local problem, rationale, significance of

the problem, key terms associated with the problem, the conceptual framework, review of

the literature addressing the problem, and project implications.

Definition of the Problem

Smalls Middle School (pseudonym) is currently defined as a Title I school with a

population of about 1,000 students. According to a curriculum and instruction audit of the

school district in which Smalls Middle School is located, about 150 of the students

(11.5%) were diagnosed with a disability such as autism, attention deficit disorder, emotional behavior disorder, or a specific learning disorder.

According to Conderman (2011), students with special needs are serviced based upon their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Students are therefore placed in the least restrictive classrooms to receive instruction. This placement is not just a local mandate, but a national one as well (Conderman, 2011). Ninety percent of the students with special needs located at Smalls Middle School receive instruction in the classroom with their general education peers, which requires that general and special education teachers work collaboratively to assist both general and special education students in realizing and achieving their maximum academic potential.

Many of the general and special education teachers at Smalls Middle School have expressed some concern about combining students with special needs with their general education peers for a variety of reasons. Some special education teachers at Smalls Middle School believe that not enough differentiation is taking place in the general education classroom, causing students with special needs to remain academically behind their peers as the school year progresses. The information provided about the beliefs and attitudes of special and general education teachers in the school is based upon past and recent peer observation documents that took place in the collaborative classroom settings.

A lack of differentiation in the instructional setting was evident over the last several years during which 50% or more of students with special needs have failed to meet the requirements mandated on local, state, and federal assessments such as the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (Georgia Department of Education, 2011).

However, during biweekly meetings at Smalls Middle School, general education teachers argued that insufficient staff development and time constraints for planning together hinder collaboration as documented by department chairpersons at Smalls Middle School. In the school district, local officials and administrators say that they are in support of teacher collaboration, yet they have difficulty finding the time to address the concerns of general and special education teachers regarding collaboration due to multiple duty overloads. Documentation of the latter can be found by visiting the school district's website and referencing the "curriculum and instruction" audit at Smalls Middle School.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

This study centered on providing the maximum opportunities for a diverse number of students to succeed in an instructional environment that meets their individual learning needs. To support a variety of learners, including those students with special needs, a general and special education teacher are often paired together to provide services for all students. This grouping requires ongoing professional training and teacher communication. As a special education collaborative teacher, I observed a lack of teacher camaraderie every day, which often hinders both general and special education students from maximizing the students' learning potential. For example, in the collaborative teaching model where one teaches and one assists, one teacher leads the lesson for the whole class, while the other teacher's role is to provide support in the way of managing student behavior and checking comprehension of the lesson for as many as one or several students (Friend et al., 2010). I did not see this occurring. Instead, I

observed one of the teachers preoccupied with other unrelated activities. Some students were not participating or engaged in learning. Also, on another occasion, when both teachers were clearly in charge of the entire class, one teacher often used personal pronouns such as "I" and "my" instead of "we" and "our" when discussing topics pertaining to classroom rules or instructional activities.

An audit conducted at Smalls Middle School by district officials in 2013 indicated that a lack of "differentiation" in the local instructional setting among collaborative teachers was a major concern. This lack of differentiation indicated that many students were not being supported based upon their individual learning styles in an instructional model that included two teachers in the same setting. For this study, the terms "collaboration" and "coteaching" will be used interchangeably. Information and summative data from observations conducted by local administrators and department chairpersons in the fall of 2013 supported the fact that special and general education collaboration in the instructional setting were either ineffective or failed to meet the criteria for receiving acceptable scores for attending to the needs of a diverse group of learners. This claim was supported with documentation in the fall of 2013 from conversations with department chairs and peer observations, in addition to Teacher Keys (the district's evaluation system that promotes consistency). One example of the lack of effective collaboration took place several months into the 2013 school year. Peer observers noted that after visiting several inclusive classrooms, it appeared that in more than one instance, one teacher was monopolizing what should have been a coteaching model. On several other occasions where there were unannounced visits by the local

administrative team and department chairs, archival collaborative classroom observation data from 2013 clearly showed a lack of instructional differentiation when visiting classrooms that contained both a general and special education teacher. This summative information is on file and available for viewing at the local school.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

The teachers' chief concerns at Smalls Middle School were combining special needs students and general education peers together without adequate support from their colleagues. These concerns expressed by the teachers were not just at Smalls Middle School. In a study encompassing eight different school districts in Michigan and Indiana, Jones, Youngs, and Frank (2013) compared how accessible general and special education teachers were to their local school colleagues. They discovered that a crucial phase of the new teachers' experience was how much support they received from their colleagues. This support was essential for maintaining and retaining new teachers in their local school system. Similar results were also noted in reference to the overall faculty. The results indicated that a gap exists between what is needed from administration and how much effort it puts forth to ensure that general and special education teachers build positive communal relationships (Jones et al., 2013).

Teacher collaboration concerns have gained a substantial amount of attention in western countries such as the United States due to teacher concerns about implementing the practice on an ongoing basis (Ngang, 2011). Ngang (2011) emphasized that this slow evolution has the potential of affecting student achievement. According to Jones et al.

(2013), the characteristics of schools in general have a strong effect on how general and special education teacher collaborative relationships are formed and maintained.

School districts in Alberta, Canada, strongly recommended and in some areas mandated that inclusion or collaboration be the delivery model that school districts should follow (McGhie-Richmond, Irvine, Loreman, Cizman, & Lupart, 2013). Although the mandate was not always received positively by educators, one particular district in Canada focused on being identified as a change leader focusing on positive teacher collaboration and instruction that is differentiated to assist a variety of learners (McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013). Finally, in most European countries, inclusive education meant effective teacher collaboration for the overall good of meeting the needs of students in special education. The sharing of knowledge and information amongst collaborative education teachers is considered a norm for meeting the needs of all learners (Milteniene & Venclovaite, 2012).

Based upon the evidence provided above, I believe that this problem needs to be addressed at Smalls Middle School because students of all ages and cultures are currently being placed in the least restrictive environment to receive instruction. In summary, many aspects of the professional literature mentioned above show that a disparity may exist between the way in which the local school implements and reinforces the building of collaborative teacher relationships versus how general and special education collaborative relationships should be maintained and formed. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions and attitudes of general and special education teachers regarding collaboration and to provide insight on how to best meet the needs of a

growing diverse group of learners who are mandated to receive instruction in the collaborative setting.

<div align="center">**Definitions**</div>

The following is a list of special terms and definitions that will assist in providing more clarity to understanding the identified local problem.

Active learning strategy: A strategy that involves multimodality instructional design and movement (Casale-Giannola, 2012).

Alternative teaching: A teaching format that provides students with specialized instruction in a specific academic area, where one teacher works with a small group of students while the other works with the entire class (Sileo, 2011; Sileo & van Garderen, 2010).

Coteaching: The cooperation of special education and general teachers in the same classroom through the sharing of application, teaching of curriculum, and evaluation of responsibilities (Bryant-Davis, Dieker, Pearl, & Kirkpatrick, 2012; Gürür & Uzuner (2010); King-Sears & Bowman-Kruhm, 2011).

Collaborative teaching: A term used in the field of education or other disciplines that may include two or more teachers who work together to assist the same group of students (Blanchard, 2012).

Curriculum based assessment (CBA): An assessment which provides teachers with information on the student's performance on the skills and materials associated with a specific course (Conderman & Hedin, 2012).

Inclusion (models): An educational program in a general classroom setting where students with disabilities learn with their peers (Nichols & Sheffield, 2014; Randhare Ashton, 2014; Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McCulley, 2013).

Individualized Education Program (IEP): A student individualized education program that addresses students with special education services needs using special designed instruction (Conderman & Hedin, 2012; Forbes & Billet, 2012; King-Sears & Bowman Kruhm, 2011).

One teach, one assist: A coteaching model that involves one teacher instructing an entire group, while the other teacher assists individual learners (Scheeler, Congdon, & Stansbery, 2010; Sileo, 2011)

Parallel teaching: A coteaching approach where two teachers teach the same content to two separate groups, both collaboratively and simultaneously (Gürür & Uzuner (2010); Sileo & van Garderen, 2010).

Peer coaching: A process that involves teachers working in teams to regularly observe each other, provide support, assistance, and feedback for their individual improvement (Scheeler, Congdon, & Stansbery, 2010).

Station teaching: A coteaching model where teachers share the content while remaining in their own classrooms. Students are able to switch within the classroom settings and teachers switch groups after the content is taught (Forbes & Billet, 2012; Johnson & Brumback, 2013; Moorehead & Grillo, 2013).

Timeless learning: When a student develops awe, wholeness, and a purposeful response for learning (Musser, Caskey, Samek, Kim, & Green, 2013).

Significance

In this study I addressed the conflict and challenges general and special education teachers face in sharing and collaboration, which is significant because effective teacher collaboration plays a pivotal role in ensuring the success of all learners. As teachers continue to implement changes in the instructional setting, it would be a benefit to diverse student learners if collaborative opportunities were a part of the agenda as well. Conducting this study in the local school setting has the potential for enhancing collaborative teacher performance (in general, and not just specific to middle school teachers) when working with a multifaceted group of student learners as well as improving teacher summative evaluations in the school year.

The aim of this study was to gain insight on how to facilitate teacher collaboration or professional development from the perspectives of both general and special education teachers. Conducting this study provided me with an opportunity to dialogue with peers about their classroom dynamics and determine what is working for them and, perhaps more importantly, what is not working for them. In essence, when special and general education teachers implement collaborative practices that are effective, all learners will benefit in the instructional setting.

Guiding Research Questions

Past research has shown educators that collaborative or coteaching is an innovative way of educating students with special needs, yet with any new innovation dilemmas sometimes arise. The problem that this study addresses are the challenges general and special education middle school teachers face in implementing collaborative

teaching. Both groups of teachers have expressed concern about the difficulty of working with someone with a teaching style and philosophy that is different from their own. Many teachers view learning and teaching differently. Special and general education teachers have both reported that time constraints and a lack of teacher camaraderie continue to present challenges. Although research has addressed the effects of collaboration, I believe many educators are not convinced that teacher collaboration makes a difference when working with diverse learners.

The coteaching model underscores team collaboration and communication to meet the needs of a diverse group of student learners. However, what constitutes effective team collaboration varies from teacher to teacher and sometimes from school to school. Many general education teachers feel inadequate or unprepared to teach students with special needs even with the collaboration of a special education teacher. Despite the increasing popularity of collaborative practices, research is limited on reports of teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward collaborative teaching. Education programs throughout the country need to reevaluate or assess teacher preparation necessary to support students diagnosed with a variety of disabilities. A positive outlook about working with students with special needs may play an essential role in ensuring their success.

The purpose and problem of this study formed the basis for three research questions. The research questions were:

RQ1: What are the general education teachers' perceptions and attitudes about working collaboratively with special education teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners?

RQ2: What are the perceptions and attitudes of special education teachers' about

working collaboratively with general education teachers to meet the needs of

diverse learners?

RQ3: How do general and special education teachers describe the optimum

conditions under which instructional collaboration can occur?

Due to the fact that the roles of the general and special education teachers continue to be

open to question, in this study I seek to provide evidence that additional research and/or

professional development involving key aspects of effective teacher collaboration is

necessary in order for general and special education teachers to gain additional

knowledge and training that would help them effectively work together to ensure the

success of a diverse group of learners.

Review of the Literature

Introduction

The literature review consists of relevant peer reviewed journal articles on

collaborative teaching and the challenges collaborative teachers face in inclusive

classrooms, which are aligned with the problem and purpose of this study. Over 80 peer-

reviewed articles and scholarly journals were reviewed ranging from 1991to 2016.

Although every effort was made to use only articles published in the past five years, some

earlier seminal or classic articles were reviewed to show a trend.

The literature search process included accessing both online and land based

libraries. These included the following databases: Walden University Library, Academic

Search Premier, Proquest, Dissertation and Theses Full Text, EBSCO Online, and Google

Scholar. Key descriptors and search terms included but were not limited to *collaborative teaching*, *coteaching, education reform, general and special education teachers*, *mainstreaming, parallel teaching*, *special education teachers* and *team teaching*. I organized the literature review by the following headings: the conceptual framework, literature addressing the problem, the coteaching perspective of collaboration, teacher perceptions and attitudes regarding collaboration, and other related studies and methodologies.

Conceptual Framework

I used Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory as the basis for the conceptual framework for this study. I examined the current literature on the development of coteaching as an instructional model. Situated learning theory emphasizes that learning and collaboration are often unintentional and not forced, which ensures that collaborative practices within communities of diverse cultures take on a more natural versus deliberate stance over time. Based on this theory, two key concepts provided the basis for this study: teachers' perceptions of collaboration and communities of practices. Conderman, Johnston-Rodriguez, and Hartman (2009) emphasized that it is essential that general and special educators work together to ensure accountability for meeting standards to assist students as designated by district and state educational entities. These educators are also given the major task of designing professional development plans that address issues associated with teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Individuals with similar learning philosophies, commitments, and ideas establish what Lave and Wenger (1991) term *communities of practice.* Over time, members of the collective community collaborate to formulate the knowledge and role assignments of the members of the community. The roles of the general and special education teacher are often fluid, interchangeable, and resist formal definition. Co-teachers are supposed to play equal roles in the instructional setting. However, this is often compromised when one teacher assumes the dominant role in the classroom (Nichols, Dowdy, & Nichols, 2010).

The roles teachers play in the instructional setting have become more collaborative. Teachers no longer work by themselves as they did in the past. Forlin, Earle, Loreman, and Sharma (2011) highlighted that in many regions throughout the world, inclusion has become embedded in local, federal, and state legislation. For example, when IEPs are being developed, it is expected that the general education teacher plays equally as active a role as the special education teacher assumes for establishing accommodations for the student with special needs. Based upon the deficits that exist in the local school setting as they pertain to effective teacher collaboration, I believe that incorporating the established practices of the situated learning theory will assist general and special education teachers in building positive communities of practice that will enhance teachers' perceptions of collaboration.

Nichols et al. (2010) reinforced the fact that the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 1997 (U.S. Department of Education, 1997) mandated that students diagnosed with disabilities, to the maximum extent possible, be taught with their nondisabled peers

in the general education classroom. Although the coteaching model was designed to include students with special needs in the general education classrooms, the idea of two fully certified teachers combining their efforts and resources has not always been accepted. In the remainder of this literature review, I discuss recent articles published in acceptable peer-reviewed journals relevant to the beliefs and perceptions of general and special education teachers about inclusion and collaborative teaching.

Understanding the beliefs and views about including students with special needs in general mainstream classrooms can be strong predictors of how teachers perceive inclusion and collaborative education (Forlin et al., 2011). General education teachers who are uncomfortable working with special education teachers often cite reasons such as that they were never provided formal training of professional development for building lasting relationships; instead, they were merely coerced to work with a partner with whom they did not feel connected (Forlin et al., 2011). In contrast, teachers who were knowledgeable about inclusive formats tended to embrace the instructional approach of collaboration (Forlin et al., 2011).

Thompson (2012) indicated that many beginning teachers felt inadequate or unprepared to teach students with special needs even with the collaboration of a special education teacher. The researcher also elaborated that education programs throughout the country really needed to re-evaluate how beginning teachers are prepared to support students diagnosed with a variety of disabilities. Thompson's data showed that the most effective way of preparing novice teachers for inclusion was to ensure that new teachers obtained hands on experience and collaborative efforts with special education students

and teachers. It is important to have a positive attitude about working with students with special needs; however, it is essential to have firsthand experience for assisting in ensuring their success (Thompson, 2012).

In summary, key terms associated with Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory and communities of practices include domain, community, practice, identity, and learning. The term "communities of practice" emphasizes that individuals who interact on a regular basis towards a common goal learn how to achieve better results. The shared domain of interest in this study is "co-teachers." Co-teachers ultimately form a "community" that eventually ignites mutual respect for sharing common activities for meeting a need or goal. The review that follows emphasizes how the use of a variety of researched coteaching strategies can promote a more positive interaction between collaborative teachers in inclusive settings.

The Coteaching Perspective of Collaboration

One of the most prevalent approaches today to assist in meeting the needs of a diverse group of learners is coteaching (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011). The coteaching model generally includes two professional educators within the same instructional setting collaboratively instructing, planning, and assessing students with special needs and their general education peers. In most of the typical co-taught settings, the general education teacher is the expert in structuring, planning, and pacing the implementation of the curriculum, while the special education teacher provides expertise in identifying and adapting the curriculum to a diverse group of learners (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011). In addition, according to Adesola (2012), if coteaching is

done effectively, all students benefit due to the shared ratio of student to teacher face time. Both general and special education teachers bring their expert skills, perspectives, and training to the instructional setting. There are several coteaching models that can be used to enhance the delivery of instruction while ultimately facilitating the learning of students diagnosed with disabilities. Five general models that are used the most will be discussed below.

The most frequently used model according to Fenty and McDuffie-Landrum (2011) is called *one teach, one assist*. This model dictates that one teacher will assume the lead role of instruction, while the other teacher supports student learning. The roles can be varied at any time to allow the students to observe that both teachers are capable of delivering instruction. According to the authors, the one teach one assist also supports Bandura's (1997) theory of modeling for desired behavior. Typically, this model is used during whole class instruction. Also, the supportive teacher is often the one re-directing adverse behavior and keeping all students on task as needed. Other roles of the support teacher include collecting needed data for future lessons and providing support when students appear to misunderstand a concept.

Another model is *station teaching*. Cahill and Mitra (2008) emphasized that the class is essentially divided into three or more groups that may consist of a variety of learners, including those students diagnosed with disabilities. The general and special education teacher each take one group and the third group may consist of independent learners or even be facilitated by another staff member. A benefit of this model is that it

allows active involvement of delivering instruction by both general and special education teachers (Cahill & Mitra, 2008).

Parallel teaching allows both teachers to deliver the same content at the same time while the class is divided into two different groups. A benefit of this teaching model based upon the findings of Cahill and Mitra (2008) is that teachers have the opportunity of delivering instruction using their own teaching style and differentiation techniques. It also allows teachers to lower the ratio of students to teacher ensuring that more students receive the individual support necessary to succeed. Similar to parallel teaching, the authors also mention *alternative teaching*, which is mainly used when instruction requires some form of pre-teaching, re-teaching or enrichment. In that instance, one teacher will deliver the lesson, while another teacher works with struggling learners. Finally, *team teaching* allows for both teachers to deliver the lesson together with the entire class. According to Dieker, Finnegan, Grillo, and Garland (2013), this form of coteaching is on the rise primarily due to major local school mandates and influences from state and federal legislation.

The use of appropriate coteaching models is one strategic approach for increasing effective teacher communication in that they provide specific structures for both the general and special education teacher to follow to achieve maximum results for supporting instruction and assisting students with special needs. Fenty and McDuffie-Landrum (2011) stated that students and teachers both benefit from collaboration in that it has been found to support improved social skills and enhanced academic achievement for students with special needs. Upon selecting a model that is most appropriate for the

particular setting or day, both co-teachers will then eventually determine what role they will each play. Dermirdag (2012) emphasized that special education and general education teachers should know as much as possible about each other's discipline in order to achieve maximum results in the collaborative setting. Teacher preparedness on a daily basis affects both the students and the adults.

Conderman (2011) emphasized that coteaching involves teacher interaction, mutual respect, and open communication to receive maximum results in ensuring effective instructional delivery to a variety of student learners. This is necessary when supporting students with special needs in that they should feel that both teachers are mutually invested in their progress. Hepner and Newman (2010) elaborated even further by stating that coteaching not only assists students with special needs and builds strong teacher relationships, it also provides higher performing students the opportunity to be challenged to achieve even more. The findings indicated that peer relationships and self confidence in students with special needs had a better chance of being established through positive academic success and enhanced social skills (Hepner & Newman, 2010).

Based upon the findings of Nichols et al. (2010), the goals of coteaching should range from enhancing student performance to increasing the options for instruction to meet the needs of a diverse group of student learners, including those special needs. Christensen, Horn, and Johnson (2011) stated that education should be made to fit the way a student learns and not the other way around. This is essential when general and special education teachers are planning and working collaboratively (no matter what the subject) to assist a variety of students who often learn in different ways. King-Shaver

and Hunter (2009) echoed these sentiments by suggesting that middle school teachers should use strategies that address language across the curriculum to enhance the needs of a diverse group of learners.

Conderman et al. (2009) conducted a study that emphasized that placing focus on the way teachers communicate with each other is of the utmost importance for ensuring collaborative teaching success. It should be noted that teachers working together in such an intimate instructional setting to support the needs of a diverse group of learners must understand what their co-worker is feeling, thinking, and doing to assist in driving instruction. Fenty and McDuffie-Landrum (2011) elaborated on recent research findings, that to address many of these concerns, teachers must discuss these issues in a common planning time format. Teachers are generally provided with an hour or more each day to ensure that instructional delivery planning and communication breakdowns are addressed in appropriate and timely manners. Murawski (2012) provided an overview of 10 tips for planning with your co-teacher to enhance the learning of students with special needs. The tips include, establishing time to plan collaboratively on a regular basis, finding an environment with minimal distractions, being prepared with an agenda to minimize lost time, establishing a plan for roles and responsibilities, and communicating and keeping a list of student concerns.

According to Conderman et al. (2009), engaging in on-going, pertinent communication with special educators throughout the local school is a priority for school administrators and general educators. Very often general education teachers express the need for additional staff development and training to assist them in acquiring the skills

necessary to enhance their support for a diverse group of learners. It has also been communicated through the study that those educators who offer adverse perspectives to joining collaboration are more likely to not be effective collaborators essentially due to a lack of knowledge. Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, and Algozzine (2012) highlight that despite ongoing concerns and debates about collaborative education, inclusion can work if given priority within the local school district. Continuous reflection regarding collaboration must take place among administrators, community stake holders, teachers, and parents.

On many occasions, students with special needs receive services in general classroom settings without the assistance of a special education teacher. In my local school setting, this occurs in such classes as band, music, art, Spanish, business education (often called connection classes), and physical education. Although the general education teachers are not considered to be co-teachers, they are still considered to be collaborators that assist in positively informing the direction of students diagnosed with a disability. According to Vangarderen, Stormont, and Goel (2012), a major barrier to collaborative teaching is that most general education teachers do not feel prepared to teach students with special needs. Collaboration, at this point must take place outside of the classroom setting between special education and general education teachers. Ludlow (2012) emphasized that collaboration is a hallmark of effective special education. Special education teachers must coordinate their work days to include dialoguing and communicating with connection and physical education teachers to ensure that the

transition to an all general education setting is a positive experience for students diagnosed with disabilities.

Although researchers indicate the benefits of coteaching, there are also complexities that exist when teachers are working together to assist students diagnosed with disabilities. According to Friend et al. (2010), there still lie many issues with emerging literature on how to best service the needs of special education students. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 required that all students regardless of their disability be exposed to and have access to the general curriculum. The ultimate goal was to ensure that students with special needs had an equal opportunity to interact with their general education peers (Quigney, 2008).

Pugach and Winn (2011) reminded us that coteaching, while very common in today's schools, often does little to enhance the novice special education teacher. It is essential that administrators play a pivotal role in pairing novice teachers with veteran general education teachers who display a sense of sensitivity and inclusivity for assisting students diagnosed with disabilities. Walsh (2012) supported teacher collaboration as well by discussing the results of a study that students who received services in a co-taught setting versus a self-contained classroom learned more and felt better about themselves due to benefiting from two educators delivering instruction within the same setting. Also, Wilcox and Angelis (2012) demonstrated in a recent study that a local school system that supports and uses collaborative teacher instruction creates a culture of high academic achievement among students. The consensus of professional opinion

embraced the policy strategy of capacity building to improve the school in its institutional

relationship with the community (Wilcox & Angelis, 2012).

Teacher Perceptions and Attitudes Regarding Collaboration

Teacher accountability is at the forefront of education policy. More specifically,

legislation requires that teachers must collaborate more now than ever to ensure the

success of a diverse population of students. The perceptions and attitudes of teachers

play a pivotal role in achieving accountability. Datnow (2011) discussed how teacher

collaboration and camaraderie are essential components for school improvement. The

researcher also revealed that teachers' attitudes toward collaboration were derived in part,

by how collaboration was perceived by the local administration. The teachers

participating in the study emphasized that positive peer pressure and not finger pointing

had to play a role in facilitating the discussion for how to assist all learners. Todd (2012)

discussed how three support teachers who displayed varying work habits overcame

obstacles that they were faced within collaborative settings by committing to enhancing

their own deficits and biases to meet the needs of their students. They accomplished this

by gaining additional professional development and cultural sensitivity training.

Another study conducted by Charles and Dickens (2012) showed that teachers

often reported that there were many challenges when they were placed in coteaching

situations. Teachers reported a lack of full administrative support, professional

development, and a lack of committed scheduling time for collaboration. This all

weighed heavily upon their decision to establish camaraderie with their co-teacher.

Charles and Dickens provided tools and knowledge that would assist in providing

teachers foundational avenues for improved collaborative experiences. The researchers placed emphasis upon the Common Core State Standards Initiative which if implemented effectively provides a very clear path for all teachers to progress in a unified manner to assist a variety of students in excelling academically. The initiative also highlights the need for well-trained highly qualified teachers to build an ongoing rapport and communication unit for meeting the needs of students with exceptional learning needs. The introduction of Web 2.0 resources, or web based technology was another tool highlighted by Charles and Dickens that can be used in order that collaborative teachers stay in constant communication even when time is limited.

Other Related Studies and Methodologies

Gürür and Uzuner (2010) used an action research model based on a coteaching approach to phenomenologically analyze the opinions of both general and special education teachers working in inclusion classes. The semi-structured interviews focused on the teachers' opinions at several different stages. Participants included students from the second grade, an additional classroom teacher, and the special education teacher researcher. Gürür and Uzuner reported that individual perceptions, opinions, attitudes, and intentions influence how successful a program application will be. According to the researchers, effective communication along with selflessness for helping others were integral to obtaining positive research findings. Finally, Gürür and Uzuner noted that disharmony involving one or any of the concepts mentioned above can be harmful among teachers who come from different cultural environments and differ in personalities.

Randhare Ashton (2014) used a qualitative case study method to analyze dominance and power balance in an inclusive co-teacher eighth grade classroom and examined coteaching from a perspective focused on disability studies in education. One perspective highlights the dominance of educational practices that reflect a deficit model of disability rather than democratic models with broader ideas of inclusion.

Randhare Ashton (2014) collected data via recorded observations of the two teachers in their co-taught class over a one-month time period. The data were analyzed using an analytic model for understanding power differential in educational settings. Information was grouped under the themes of benefit, accountability, initiation, legitimation, and representation. The findings indicated that the co-teachers accepted dominance and separation of the traditional general educational model of instruction. Their actions were reflective of their conceptions of what it meant to be a special and general educator and hindered them being inclusive co-teachers. The researcher concluded that the dominance of the state mandated curriculum and dominant general education discourse reflects a larger culture where currently, through federal education legislation, standardization and uniformity are privileged.

Scheeler, Congdon, and Stansberry (2010) found that both teachers in a collaborative classroom are capable of being highly engaged in administering an instructional lesson. The researchers used three dyads of co-teacher participants that included five women and one man, using a multiple baseline across participants' design. Scheeler et al. assessed the effects of "peer-coaches" while providing feedback immediately to correct actions though a bug-in-ear (BIE) technology during specific

intervals taking place during instruction. Several of the teacher participants noted that

having a transmitter for two-way communication would be beneficial in this instance and

rated the technique as beneficial. The researchers' findings show that the teachers'

behaviors were maintained across settings and the instruction administered was effective.

The three components of the three-term contingency (TTC) trial included the student

response, the teacher antecedent response, and the teacher follow up response.

　　　Using a grounded theory approach, Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, and McCulley

(2012) conducted a study to identify studies of coteaching and inclusion synthesis

between the years 1990 to 2010. Approximately 146 studies were analyzed and

synthesized to better understand collaborative models of instruction. The synthesis

included an investigation of research on student outcomes, such as teacher attitudes,

beliefs, and perceptions, collaborative models, and student perceptions. Three of the

research areas focused primarily on teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of inclusion

and coteaching models. The professional relationship formed between the teachers

before and during the coteaching experience was identified as an essential factor in the

success of coteaching models. Findings showed that teachers do not always follow

recommendations by specialists for improved instructional practices, but when specialists

coordinated the changes in the curriculum, teachers were more likely to implement the

significant changes. The researchers concluded that in a typical model for inclusion, the

special needs teacher played a supporting role, while the general education teacher

provided the majority of instruction (Solis et al., 2012).

Conclusion

  The literature review offered support that coteaching is an innovative way of educating students with special needs and reinforced the fact that disabled students, to the maximum extent possible, should be taught with nondisabled students in the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 1997; Nichols et al., 2010). Yet, as the literature indicated, dilemmas sometimes arise and several things can stand in the way of effective teaching in general. Researchers suggested that some issues are unique to the coteaching process. For example, Gürür and Uzuner (2010) reported that individual perceptions, attitudes and intentions influence the successful application of collaborative teaching. Forlin et al. (2011) pointed out that general education teachers' level of comfort with working with special education teachers may be related to a lack of formal training or professional development and do not feel connected. Charles and Dickens (2012) reported that teachers faced challenges such as a lack of full administrative support, professional development, and a lack of committed scheduling time for collaboration.

  In conclusion, like any other educational practices, collaborative teaching can be successfully implemented if the teachers' roles are clearly defined. Administrators and teachers must develop tools to evaluate the success of all students in the collaborative model and make the appropriate changes when coteaching is not working. This study will be a positive step in that direction.

Implications

General education teachers who are uncomfortable working with special

education teachers often cite reasons such as never being provided with formal training of

professional development for building lasting relationships; instead, they were just

coerced to work with a partner with whom they did not feel connected (Forlin et al.,

2011). In contrast, teachers who were knowledgeable about inclusive formats tend to

embrace the instructional approach of collaboration (Forlin et al., 2011). These concerns

and the information gained from the study could set the foundation for such projects as a

professional development workshop on presenting effective ways and best practices for

implementing collaborative teaching in the inclusive classroom, or a locally published

booklet on the same topic. Another consideration would be to synthesize all of the

findings of the data to present to the local school board in order to promote awareness

within the local school district. The primary aim of this study was to ensure whether

collaborative teaching is addressing the needs of students with special needs.

Summary/Transition Statement

It is essential to recognize that the role of both the general and special education

teacher is essential for ensuring the success of all student learners. Teacher perceptions

and attitudes pertaining to collaboration within the instructional setting play pivotal roles

in establishing an environment for learner success. Understanding the optimal conditions

under which instructional collaboration can occur requires a variety of instructional

procedures and training. If the special and general education teachers display and use

proven researched methods for establishing effective collaboration, then they can

maximize the needs of all learners. In Section 2, I introduce the methodology of the study including the research design and approach; the setting and sample; instrumentation and materials; data collection and analysis; assumptions, limitations, scope, and delimitations; and the protection of the participants. Section 3 consists of the project for the final study and is based on the findings from my research. Finally, in Section 4, I summarize the study by way of reflection and conclusion sections.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

In this section, I highlight the research design that I used to address the problem and support the research questions for this qualitative case study. The problem, purpose, and research questions formed the basis for this design and methodology. The research questions were:

RQ1: What are the general education teachers' perceptions and attitudes about working collaboratively with special education teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners?

RQ2: What are the perceptions and attitudes of special education teachers' about working collaboratively with general education teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners?

RQ3: How do general and special education teachers describe the optimum conditions under which instructional collaboration can occur?

The Qualitative Research Design and Approach

In qualitative inquiry, the focus is placed upon an in depth exploration of a central phenomenon versus generalizing to a population (Creswell, 2009). A qualitative research design emphasizes reporting findings in narrative format as opposed to numerical data. Qualitative data tend to be less objective than numerical data, but they provide the researcher a platform to describe phenomena in real-world language. Merriam (2009) stressed that qualitative research data gathering is subjective as well because qualitative research data come directly from the source being investigated. In essence, subjective

data, unlike objective data, are generally not proven but rather experienced through real life interactions. According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2013), qualitative data provide explanations of information processed by humans through well-grounded rich descriptions that inform the reader. With qualitative data, it is possible to understand the events that led to a particular consequence, preserve the flow of chronological information, as well as attain substance filled explanations. The reason that I opted not to use a quantitative design was because it requires explanation versus exploration. Experimental and correlational designs often seek to find the outcome of a prediction by manipulating variables; this is not the heart of this particular study (Creswell, 2012). My conclusion was that qualitative studies that are well analyzed often develop into more meaningful organized stories with concrete reliability, which is what I was anticipating in the findings for this study of teacher perceptions on collaboration.

For this study, I used the instrumental case study design. Merriam (2009) stated that the purpose of an instrumental case study is to redraw a generalization or simply provide detailed insight into a particular issue. The issue of teacher perception regarding collaboration is not new; however, the concerns at Smalls Middle School required additional investigation to assist in interpreting why there is a communication breakdown among general and special education teachers in the collaborative classroom. Therefore, it is essential to note that the purpose of the study, not the case, highlights the major difference between an instrumental and an intrinsic case study (Grandy, 2014). According to Creswell (2009), when a researcher explores an activity, event, program, and process of one or more individuals in depth, it is known as a case study. Yin (2009)

focused on the aspect that a research design's primary purpose is to represent a logical set of statements that can be judged and tested by its design quality and effectiveness. Therefore, in using the case study tradition, I sought to develop an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and attitudes of a small group of general and special education collaborative teachers in their natural settings by collecting interview data.

The intent for studying this case was to provide insight into an issue of ongoing concern in the local school and community. Hancock and Algozzine (2006) created a checklist of when it is appropriate to use case study research. A few of the topics included the following: (a) a discussion involving whether or not the research addresses a question that focuses on a group of individuals or a central phenomenon, (b) whether or not there is previous peer reviewed literature to support the cause, and (c) if there is data available to answer questions or make inquiries. More importantly, the goal of this research is to understand the viewpoint under investigation that focuses on the participants' and not the researcher's perspective (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).

While case study seemed more appropriate for the present study, other qualitative designs were considered and excluded. Among them were the phenomenological approach and grounded theory. The phenomenological approach focuses on the essence of the lived experiences of the individual (Merriam, 2009). The inquiry attempts to deal with inner experiences unprobed in an individual's everyday life. Grounded theory is a qualitative research approach that seeks to explain some action, interaction, or process. Hancock and Algozzine (2006) emphasized that the investigator is the one who attempts to inductively derive meaning from the data and is the key data collection instrument.

Also the theory is grounded or rooted in observation. Although each of these approaches exemplifies the characteristics of qualitative research, I excluded the latter two because one focuses almost solely on the individual and the other places major focus on the investigator rather than the central phenomenon. I deemed the case study design to be the most appropriate to explore and describe the perceptions and attitudes of special education teachers' about working collaboratively with general education teachers due to their essential descriptions of a single unit held captive by space and time (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).

The Participants

The participants included four special education collaborative teachers and four general education collaborative teachers. The total numbers of teachers eligible to participate included nine special education teachers and 12 general education teachers, who at the time of this research served in collaborative or co-teacher roles at Smalls Middle School. Participants were selected based upon their willingness and availability to be a part of the study. Another one of the standards used for selecting participants was that they were information rich (Merriam, 2009). I reached data saturation through depth of inquiry with a minimal number of participants; however, should that have not occurred, I would have continued to use additional participants as necessary. Purposeful sampling was used in this study. Purposeful sampling in qualitative research means that researchers intentionally select individuals to learn or understand a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). The central phenomenon that I studied involved teachers' perceptions

and attitudes of collaboration to assist a variety of student learners including students diagnosed with a disability.

Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants

Access to all participants was gained with written permission from the school administrator. A signed letter of cooperation was submitted as required by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. Once I was given permission from the school administrator and the Walden IRB, I invited all general and special education collaborative teachers to participate by sending each a letter of introduction and consent form by e-mail, which explained the purpose of the study and what would be involved if they chose to participate.

Based upon their consent to participate in the study, only general and special education teachers who served in the role of a certified co-teacher at the time of this study were asked to participate. The participants were willing to share information about their collaborative experiences, were willing to participate voluntarily, and were available to participate in the study for the duration. My goal was to review lesson plans and collect interview information from eight to 12 middle school teachers, which included four to six special education collaborative teachers and four to six general education teachers at Smalls Middle School.

Methods of Establishing a Researcher-Participant Working Relationship

I serve as a collaborative special education teacher at Smalls Middle School where the study was conducted. To gain trust and the willingness to be authentic from the participants, I worked to understand and develop a rapport with each of the teachers by

constructing meaning of what their lives as collaborative teachers was like (Creswell, 2012). My relationship with the teachers was collegial. My goal was to establish an ongoing rapport with the participants that would ensure that they felt comfortable in disclosing pertinent information. I emphasized the critical roles of confidentiality and anonymity before the study took place. I do not directly supervise any of the participants and none of them directly report to me. My role as researcher was to conduct the study in an ethical and professional manner. As a teacher in the same local middle school, I have and will continue to maintain a professional relationship with the participants, which is limited to knowing and working with the participants. I have no conflict of interest, supervisory relationship, or power over any of the participants. I am aware that the potentiality of knowing and working with the participants in my local work setting could possibly compromise the data collection and analysis. However, I would like to reiterate that my relationship with the potential participants is exclusively professional, and I do not have an outside-of-work affiliation with any of them. I made the participants aware that I did not desire to hold any future position of leadership at the local school. I minimized any ethical challenges by making the participants aware of my understanding of the sensitivity of collecting data in the workplace setting, while at the same time always remaining conscious that my own bias did not interfere with the data collection and analysis in the research process.

Methods for Ethical Protection of Participants

As the primary data collection instrument, I was responsible for conducting this research in an ethical manner that met the highest standards outlined by the Walden

University IRB (approval number 1170532) and that complied with any federal

regulations for the protection of human participants in qualitative research. On April 27,

2013 I received a certificate from the National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural

Research for the successful completion of the web-based training course "Protecting

Human Research Participants." I followed and complied with the guidelines established

by Walden to ensure that all risks to participants would be minimized. All participants

signed an informed consent form that was discussed and distributed following one of the

local faculty meetings in a private meeting room. The consent form stated the terms of

the research and the secure measures that would be taken to protect privacy of the

participants and maintain the confidentiality of the data. Participation in the study was

voluntary and participants could withdraw from the study at any time. I conducted an

interview with each of the participants individually and later followed up with another

interview. The initial interviews took approximately 45 minutes and were held at a

mutually agreed upon location. The follow-up interviews took no longer than 30 minutes

and were held at the same place as the previous interview. Also, to ensure the accuracy

and credibility of the information gathered through my interviews with the participants, I

performed member checking where I met briefly with each of the participants so that they

could read and corroborate my account of the information obtained from the interviews

with them. This was done at a time that was convenient for the participant. The

participants were informed in advance that the interviews would be recorded and

transcribed for analysis.

All transcripts, notes, and tape recordings were stored in a secured and protected area for the duration of the study. Any documents stored on my computer are password protected and accessible and known by me only. All documents, audio recordings, transcripts, and electronic data will be maintained for a period of five years after which they will be destroyed. To further protect the participants' privacy and confidentiality, the public middle school location and actual name of participants were not identified in the study.

Data Collection

I collected data primarily through two key sources: face to face interviews and lesson plans. The in-depth semistructured individual interviews with the eight participants were no longer than 45 minutes each for the initial interviews and 30 minutes for the follow-up interviews (see Appendix B and Appendix C). All interview questions were open-ended and designed to help engage the participants and assist them in talking about their collaborative experiences and perceptions. All data from the interviews were reviewed and transcribed soon after the interview took place. To ensure the accuracy and flow of the participant interviews, I developed an interview protocol form that contained the instructions for conducting the interviews and allowed sufficient space for recording notes and responses. I used a separate form for each of the participants.

The general and special education collaborative lesson plans were requested and obtained from the teachers participating in the study at Smalls Middle School. Lesson plans are completed and submitted on a weekly basis to the department chairs. Although lesson plans are readily available for teachers to acquire at the local school, for the

purpose of this study, I requested them by way of using a data set agreement form. I reviewed two lesson plans from each participant. The lesson plans are available for viewing by anyone upon request and approval of the local administration. Information from the lesson plans assisted in providing evidence of patterns and trends that helped to validate the teaching and learning styles of teachers and students in collaborative classrooms. The lesson plans also allowed me the opportunity to view and analyze how the teachers' lesson plans reflected collaborative approaches to inclusive instruction (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006).

Data Analysis Methods

Data were analyzed inductively, using a bottom up approach, which consisted of first gathering data from the interviews and lesson plans to prepare the information for data analysis. Inductive analysis was appropriate for this study because I was interested in formulating my hypothesis after the data collection process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). I gathered data using the following steps in the order that follows: I secured one of the meeting rooms within the local school to ensure privacy when meeting individually with the eight participants. Each participant was given a range of meeting times to choose from that was based upon his or her availability. The initial interviews took place before school, after school, or teacher planning time during the pre-planning week at the local school and lasted no more than 45 minutes for each of the eight participants. Prior to the interviews, participants were told that interviews would be audio recorded with their permission. At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed informed consent and informed each participant that I would conduct a follow-up interview session as well as a

brief meeting for member checking the findings. Each of the individual interviews were audiotaped and manually transcribed by me. Consideration for pauses, laughter, and intercom announcements were noted on my observation recording sheet.

I scheduled and conducted follow up interviews over a 2-week period after the initial interviews with each of the participants. The follow-up interviews were also transcribed manually by me and lasted no more than 30 minutes. One week after the follow-up interviews took place, I met separately with each of the participants for no longer than 20 minutes and asked them to verify the accuracy of my analysis of their interviews. There were no issues with the findings. Additionally, there were no discrepant data to report because the data collected fell within the themes derived from data analysis.

The accuracy of the findings produced by member checking conducted with the study participants was reinforced by the process of triangulation (discussed later). Triangulation is the process of corroborating the accuracy of data by combining different methods of data collection (Creswell, 2012). In this case, I drew upon multiple sources such as the initial and follow-up interviews and analysis of the collaborative lesson plans to find evidence to support a particular theme and reinforce the accuracy of the data.

With the help of Atlas.ti 6.0, qualitative software designed primarily for the qualitative researcher, I managed and coded the interview transcripts. First, I imported my word processing files (transcribed interviews) directly into the program software. Although my interviews began as audio recordings, one of the main challenges of using this software was that I had to make sure that my data were in text-based electronic

format. This format required me to transcribe each of the interviews into a word processing application. The program allowed me to store, organize, and assign labels and codes that essentially helped me to formulate themes or patterns from the data. I used a highlight feature within the program to color code the files into various themes where patterns begin to emerge. I also reviewed my own manual transcripts to ensure that no significant data were omitted. Atlas.ti also assisted me in organizing text that was gathered from the lesson plans. One of the major purposes of using the teacher lesson plans was to assist me in corroborating the findings that may derive from the participant interviews (Merriam, 2009). I analyzed the teacher lesson plans by reading through them thoroughly and extracting and noting key informational data as they relate to the research questions.

To ensure consistency of the data that I received from the interviews and the teacher lesson plans, I began manually coding by way of an open coding process where I circled and highlighted key reoccurring words. After coding and reducing the text to descriptions, I then began to organize the coded data into categories that helped to identify emerging themes (Yin, 2009). The coded data eventually led me to use axial coding that led to grouping larger chunks of coded information into themes. Coding is a process implemented by qualitative researchers for both categorizing qualitative data and for describing the implications and details of these categories (Merriam, 2009). After manually coding the data, I used the Atlas.ti 6.0 software auto coding tool to scan the interview transcripts and lesson plans for important key words and automatically assign a priori codes based on reoccurring words. By attaching labels to lines of texts and

inserting that information into the automatic coding system for entering in structured data

such as my interview transcripts, I identified reoccurring patterns and emergent themes

within the data. The codes and themes derived from the auto coding software were in

alignment with the codes and themes of my manual coding process. More specifically, I

identified meaningful chunks of sentences and specific wording that often overlapped,

such as a lack of planning time and effective training.

Evidence of Quality

Evidence of quality procedures were presented to assure the accuracy and

credibility of the findings. The primary method was triangulation of interviews and

document analysis of teacher collaborative lesson plans. Triangulation is the process of

corroborating the accuracy of data by using different individuals and methods of data

collection (Creswell, 2012). For example, information regarding the teachers'

perceptions contained in the interviews combined with information obtained from the

collaborative lesson plans provided a theme or pattern to support the authenticity of the

data. Therefore, the data derived from the lesson plans helped to support the findings

from the interviews. I also used member checking to ensure the accuracy of the data. I

provided all special education and general education participants in the study with a copy

of my research findings for them to determine the accuracy of their data, allowed them to

review those findings, and provided them an opportunity to discuss those findings with

me (Creswell, 2012). Member checking took place with each of my participants during

teacher planning periods, and after faculty meetings over a 1-week period after the initial

and follow-up interviews. The participants affirmed that I accurately captured their intent

correctly and that my bias was not evident.

Findings

In order to gather data to answer my research questions, I conducted individual

interviews (initial and follow-up) with eight participants, four general education teachers

and four special education teachers. Each of the participants has served in the role of a

collaborative teacher. I also analyzed two collaborative lesson plans submitted by each

of the teachers who were interviewed for a total of 16 lesson plans. I assigned

pseudonyms such as GE1 or SE2 to protect the anonymity of the participants for the

interview data and collaborative lesson plans for the purpose of this study. GE was

assigned for the general education teachers and SE for the special education teachers.

The research questions for this study included the following:

RQ1: What are the general education teachers' perceptions and attitudes about

working collaboratively with special education teachers to meet the needs of

diverse learners?

RQ2: What are the perceptions and attitudes of special education teachers' about

working collaboratively with general education teachers to meet the needs of

diverse learners?

RQ3: How do general and special education teachers describe the optimum

conditions under which instructional collaboration can occur?

Based on the data gathered from this study, several themes were derived that

supported and gave merit to the research questions. I used pattern matching to help

identify common themes that emerged from the data because I wanted to show that there was evidence to support or validate my explanations for comparing various categories and incidents. Member checking was used to verify the findings using participants' data.

The Lesson Plans

The purpose of using the teacher lesson plans as an additional source of data was to gain greater understanding and insight on the effects of teacher collaboration and planning. Although most of the lesson plans were developed by both the general and special education teachers as opposed to being developed by just one of the teachers, 6 out of 16 of the lesson plans did not demonstrate any evidence of input from the special education teachers regarding necessary accommodations or specialized strategies. Based upon the local school and district lesson plan template, the plans should have included information about the planning and execution of the goals and objectives for meeting the needs of a variety of learners, including students with disabilities. Instead, the six lesson plans displayed no evidence of specific roles for each of the teachers. The county mandates that every collaborative lesson plan must show evidence of a coteaching model as well as three key components: the opening, work session, and the closing. Although the content of each of the 16 lesson plans identified the subject and theme of the lessons, three of the plans failed to reveal the coteaching model and how the collaborative teachers would execute the plans. In other words, which teacher would be responsible for the opening, work session, and closing of the lesson to ensure that all students were serviced appropriately.

I also found limited evidence of differentiation, a district mandate for all collaborative lesson plans, in the lesson plans that were reviewed. Differentiation would include offering students multiple ways of engaging with the content and demonstrating that knowledge. On 7 of the 16 lesson plans that I received, the special education teacher's name was not included on the document. Including the special education teacher's name on the lesson plan is significant to ensure that both teachers are properly acknowledged as having equitable legitimate instructional roles. Only four of the lesson plans indicated the service model (e.g., coteaching, parallel) to be implemented during the instructional day. The school district makes it clear that evidence of at least one of three mandatory service models should appear in every collaborative lesson plan. Overall, information gathered from the lesson plans supported data gathered from the teacher interviews, which indicated that a consistent lack of planning, communication, and collaboration occurred on a regular basis.

Introduction to Themes

Throughout the remainder of the findings section I will discuss the three major themes that were derived from my overall data analysis as they related to the individual research questions. The themes are (a) collaborative teacher experience, (b) the roles of administration in the collaborative teacher process, and (c) obstacles to effective coteaching/optimal conditions for collaborative teaching (see Table 1).

Table 1

Themes

Themes	Subthemes	Research question connected to
1. Collaborative teacher experience	- No official protocol - Unaware of protocol - Initial shock - Teacher knowledge - Teacher intimidation/confidence - Strengths and weaknesses	1 & 2
2. The roles of administration in the collaborative teacher process	- Clearly outline and support both general and special education teachers - Clearly defined roles of each teacher	1 & 2
3a. Obstacles to effective collaboration	- Lesson Planning time (shortage) - Adequate preparation - Shared training simultaneously	3
3b. Optimal conditions for collaboration	- Strategies for assisting all students - Both teachers support all students - Resources - Classroom management strategies	3

RQ1: General Education Teachers' Perceptions and Attitudes About Collaboration

In the first research question, I inquired about general education teachers'

perceptions and attitudes about working collaboratively with special education teachers to

meet the needs of diverse learners. Themes 1 and 2 address this question. Each of the

participating general education teachers shared their experiences of collaboration. To

gather some basic demographic information, I asked each teacher about their highest

level of education, years of teaching experience, and years of teaching experience in the

collaborative setting. Six of the eight teachers held a Master's degree or above and the

average number of years taught among all teachers was 11 years. The number of years of

teaching in the collaborative setting ranged from 2 to 23 years. Table 2 displays the

teacher participant and demographic information.

Table 2

Teacher Participant Demographics

Name	Level of education	Years of teaching experience	Years teaching in collaborative setting
GE1	Master's	14	4
GE2	Master's	13	12
GE3	Bachelor's	17	5
GE4	Master's	2	2
SE1	Bachelor's	2	1.5
SE2	Specialist	23	23
SE3	Master's	2	2
SE4	Doctorate	17	12

Note. Pseudonyms used for participant protection.
GE = general education; SE = special education

Theme 1: Collaborative teacher experience. General education teachers'

experiences in a collaborative setting varied in years as well as their impressions

regarding the selection process. The years of collaborative teaching experience ranged

from 2 to 12 years, whereas the total years of experience ranged from 2 to 17 years.

Regardless of the number of years teaching, veteran teachers (those with 6 or more years

teaching according to the County school system) felt just as unprepared as newer teachers

because they were not provided with adequate training to work in the collaborative

classroom. When asked what their very first collaborative experience was like, all four of

the general education teachers interviewed responded that it was less than favorable.

Three of the teachers stated that their first experience working in collaboration involved

them working with a first or second year special education teacher who was in the

learning phase just as they were. In other words, neither of them had received sufficient

training working in a collaborative setting that focused on students with disabilities. All

the general education teachers mentioned that this issue remained unresolved, because

even though they were told training would be forthcoming, it did not happen.

The selection process for becoming a collaborative teacher was also discussed.

All the general education teachers expressed that there was no official process or that

they were not sure of what that process was. The process was the same regardless of

their years of experience for all collaborative teachers. Three of the teachers indicated

that they assumed that because they were selected as a collaborative teacher in the past,

they would be given the same assignment again. All the teachers discussed how they

were afraid to speak out about their concerns with the process for fear of retaliation from

the administrative team. When asked what they would do differently to enhance the

process, GE1, GE2, and GE3 all expressed that a staff development training is necessary

to assist in preparing teachers for working together effectively in a collaborative

classroom.

Strengths and weaknesses. When discussing strengths and weaknesses of

teacher collaboration, each of the general education teachers agreed that the major

strength of collaboration is when two teachers working together have the opportunity to lower the student to teacher ratio for supporting all students. All four general education teachers agreed that they were able to assist more students in developing academic success due to having another teacher present in the instructional setting. A weakness discussed by one of the general education teachers focused on time consumption. GE1 stated, "I felt that being a collaborative teacher required more time, and I always ended up with the students that had behavior problems. If given a choice, I would not want to be a collaborative teacher again." However, GE2 felt differently and believed that the negative view of collaboration that she once held has changed over the years. GE2 also believed that no student should be placed in a self-contained setting, but instead in a general learning environment where two highly qualified educators can assist students with a variety of learning abilities. GE2 believed that all students deserve the same opportunity to engage with their general education peers. GE2 went on to express that a major reason for teachers' change of view has been due to the opportunity to work collaboratively alongside a very skilled special education teacher who understands that authentic collaboration takes place when both general and special educators agree that their common goal must be to ensure the successful outcome of individualized student achievement. GE3 and GE4 both agreed that the amount of time spent working with another teacher so closely has also posed a concern for them in the past as well.

Theme 2: The roles of administration in the collaborative teacher process. The role of the administration in the collaborative teacher process is essential in that it sets the tone in a collaborative environment. According to the data, all four general

education teachers agreed that administration should be involved in the teacher collaboration process. The general education teachers all agreed that the administrative team should play an integral role in modeling how a successful collaborative teaching scenario should look within the instructional setting in order for there to be a 100% investment in ensuring that collaboration is a success. GE2 stated, "There should be at least one administrator who is the 'keeper of the keys' or that really hones in on the development of collaboration in order to ensure the success of the unity." General education teachers believed that administration should be more involved with the day-to-day classroom occurrences as well as student behavior. Three out of four general education teachers expressed that when they struggled to deliver effective instruction it was because they could not maintain classroom order. These teachers thought that their classroom management difficulties were due to ongoing excessive behavior concerns from many students diagnosed with behavior disabilities. Each general education teacher did not believe that the administrative and leadership team played a significant role in facilitating collaborative efforts with their special education co-teachers, especially when scenarios involved ineffective classroom management and communication breakdowns involving their co-teacher.

RQ2: Special Education Teachers' Perceptions and Attitudes About Collaboration

The second research question explored the special education teachers' perceptions and attitudes about working collaboratively with general education teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners. Several of the same themes and subthemes discussed in the previous section apply to the special education teachers' responses.

Theme 1: Collaborative teacher experience. The special education teachers' experience ranges from 1.5 years to 23 years working in the collaborative classroom. When asked about their very first collaborative teaching experience, three out of four of the special education teachers noted that they had good first experiences with their collaborative teacher. SE1 stated, "My first experience was great. We got along well. My co-teacher and I respected each other therefore our relationship was always professional and friendly." However, the fourth teacher, SE3, viewed the first collaborative teaching experience as one that was difficult due mainly to personality conflicts between the co-teachers.

No official protocol. SE2, a 23-year veteran in special education, referred to the first experience as positive because the general education teacher was open to new ideas and very innovative. SE3, a 2nd year teacher however expressed that the very first experience was very difficult, primarily due to having past experiences in the field of business and having to learn the new educational system. The teacher had no professional background in special education. All the teachers agreed that there was no specific protocol for becoming a collaborative teacher. Three of four of the special education teachers believed that the process for becoming a collaborative teacher needs more formal clarity from the local school administrative team.

Strengths and weaknesses. All four special education teachers embraced the idea of teacher collaboration to assist students with a variety of academic and behavioral needs. SE2 stated, "I enjoy the process because it allows for creative opportunity to enhance and differentiate lessons for a variety of students." Three of the four special

education teachers felt positive that collaboration can work if implemented effectively. One suggestion made included having a discussion with administration about them taking a more facilitative and active role in the collaborative team meetings. Two other special education teachers suggested that it may be helpful to have team building activities to promote more camaraderie.

  Theme 2: The roles of administration in the collaborative teacher process. All the special education teachers were in consensus that the key to affective teacher collaboration started with the foundation set by the administrative team. SE1 and SE4 both expressed that administration should work with existing collaborative teachers to help build good camaraderie to ensure that both teachers felt that they played an equal role in the instructional environment. They recalled that the members of the administrative team met with them only once for collaborative planning, and that took place at the beginning of the school year. After a couple of months into the school year, the agreed upon monthly meetings no longer occurred according to SE4. SE2 stated, "Administration is crucial… if administration is not on board reinforcing the relationship to be positive, the ship is going to sink and the students will be the ones losing out." The teachers felt that administrative support was not only essential at the beginning of the year, but throughout the year as well. All of the special education teachers commented that they believed that the diminishing morale among the collaborative teacher teams was associated with the lack of involvement of administration.

RQ3: Obstacles and Optimum Conditions for Instructional Collaboration

The focus in the third research question was to learn about general and special education teachers' views of the obstacles and optimum conditions under which instructional collaboration can occur.

Theme 3: Obstacles to effective collaboration (general education teachers' perspective). All of the general education teachers communicated that there were several obstacles that prevented them from establishing effective collaboration with their co-teachers. The data gathered from this study showed that the general education teachers emphasized that a lack of planning time for lessons, inadequate preparation for instruction, and not enough shared simultaneous training with their co-teacher was an obstacle to collaboration (see Table 3). One of the most noteworthy obstacles was a lack of teacher planning together and co-lesson planning. All four of the general education teachers stated that on many occasions they had to create the lesson plans by themselves because they never had an opportunity to meet with their co-teacher due to reasons beyond their control, such as unexpected meetings about subject matters that had nothing to do with collaborative planning. Not meeting collaboratively made it difficult to execute the plan in the instructional setting if the special education teacher was seeing it for the first time on the actual day of execution. According to all of the general education teachers, when members of the administrative team arrived to conduct a formal or informal observation of the collaborative team, it would look as if co-planning never took place. The appearance of insufficient planning was an obstacle because both teachers

were expected to plan and deliver the lesson together simultaneously but never received the opportunity to plan for reasons out of their control.

Lack of sufficient planning time/adequate preparation. Although coteaching teams were provided weekly planning opportunities, time constraints and other departmental obligations often made it difficult to stay on a consistent schedule to make sufficient planning and preparation happen. GE1, GE3, and GE4 emphasized that both students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers could tell when teachers had not planned together or were inadequately prepared for class, because they would observe one of the teachers (generally, the special education teacher) asking questions about what was going on for the day. According to all of the general education teachers, comments made by the students regarding noticeable unpreparedness would add difficulty in the instructional delivery and cause the students to make comments to them or out loud to each other regarding the credibility of the special education teacher. Another obstacle discussed by all four general education teachers focused on concerns of the special education teacher's inability to effectively manage behavioral concerns in the classroom primarily for students diagnosed with behavioral disabilities. The general education teachers mentioned that they were often struggling to handle behavioral situations alone. In addition, three of the four general education teachers believed that professional development opportunities were necessary to assist in strengthening the co-teacher relationship in the instructional setting.

Table 3

Obstacles to Effective Collaboration

General education teacher concerns	Special education teacher concerns
Lack of teacher planning	Insufficient amount of planning time
Classroom management concerns	Communication concerns
Professional development inadequacies	More professional development necessary
	Ineffective teacher lesson plans

Theme 3: Obstacles to effective collaboration (special education teachers'

perspective). The biggest challenge that was mentioned during the individual interviews

of the special education teachers focused on not having adequate planning time with their

collaborative teacher (see Table 3). Planning collaboratively is essential to

accomplishing goals and fulfilling instructional mandates. Three of the four special

education teachers proclaimed that on the rare occasions after planning did take place;

they would enter the collaborative classroom and observe a totally different lesson plan

being implemented from what was previously discussed in the collaborative meeting.

This new lesson plan made them feel inadequate to deliver the lesson effectively due to

not being prepared to discuss a topic that they had no prior knowledge about.

Lack of sufficient planning time. Another major obstacle that was discussed by

each of the special education teachers was a lack of working together to formulate

effective teacher lesson plans. All four of the special education teachers mentioned that

on many occasions they were not involved in the creation of the lesson plans. Not being

involved in the lesson planning often led to insufficient differentiation within the lesson

plans to meet the needs of students diagnosed with specific learning disabilities or severe

academic challenges. A lack of collaborative teacher planning time also showed that lesson plans did not include accommodations for students with disabilities.   SE2 expressed that when the teacher does plan with the co-teacher to create a lesson plan for all students, it is often for display only and did not reflect what happened in the classroom.

Theme 3: Optimal conditions for working collaboratively. Both the general and special education teachers acknowledged that effective collaboration is essential. Collaboration can occur only if specific measures such as ongoing active communication and professional development are put in place to ensure that the needs of a variety of learners are maximized. According to GE1, "the best conditions for instructional collaboration are when both the general education and the special education teacher have been adequately trained to work with each other to support a growing diverse group of learners". Six of the eight teachers (four SE and two GE) believed that additional training on coteaching models would benefit teachers and enhance student achievement. GE4 expressed that a professional development class on effective communication among collaborative teachers would be an asset for becoming a better collaborative teacher. Seven of the eight teachers (four GE and three SE) discussed that both collaborative teachers must have a good working knowledge of the content to appear credible to the students.

Strategies and other resources. Another optimal condition discussed was related to classroom management. According to GE1, "classroom management skills and strategies currently being used could stand a major overhaul." The teacher went on to

say, "I often feel as if I am struggling to keep behaviors at bay rather than delivering instruction necessary for mastering standards." GE2 and SE4 provided similar accounts pertaining to classroom disruption. "No matter how well teachers get along, if classroom management is a concern, then students ultimately lose out in the end," stated GE1. SE4 discussed that often the general education teacher fails to allow special education teachers to assist in educating them on the most effective strategies for curbing ongoing behavior concerns for students diagnosed with a variety of behavior disorders.

Discussion of the Findings

In response to the first two research questions regarding the perceptions of general and special education teachers, participants indicated that additional professional development and training is necessary to achieve optimal results for maximizing student achievement. These findings were consistent with teacher concerns from Section 1 and current research. Findings derived from the interviews and lesson plan data indicated that a lack of instructional differentiation in the collaborative setting existed. The information provided by the teachers pertaining to a lack of teacher lesson planning time also corroborated with deficits in the format of the lesson plans. The lesson format is critical in that it is the guide in which administrative observers determine if instructional differentiation is occurring. Therefore, additional professional development on lesson plan content and delivery could, if implemented enhance the collaborative teacher instructional delivery process. Providing additional collaborative lesson planning would also support the philosophy of Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice theory that addresses why collaboration is essential for meeting to achieving accountability

standards. The social interaction and collaboration of the teachers in this case are

essential components of situated learning. The goal is that teachers will eventually adapt

to the ongoing communication and collaborative efforts as a norm for becoming involved

with a community of practice.

The lack of differentiation within the lesson taught as well as ineffective

collaborative lesson plans were initially addressed in Section 1 of this study, and were

validated in the findings section. The findings of the teacher interviews also supported

the audit conducted at the local middle school referenced in Section 1, which indicated a

lack of differentiation within the local instructional setting. The lesson plans were

reviewed for differentiation as previously explained in the Findings section.

Also, due to a lack of collaboration, teachers were unsure of their roles in the

classroom and felt they would benefit from additional training on coteaching models.

Several of the general and special education teachers indicated that they felt inadequate in

delivering one or more of the service models. Six of the eight teachers indicated that

additional training is needed in this area to assist in increasing student achievement.

Tzivinikou (2015a) emphasized that collaborative teachers should be familiar with the

five teaching models to ensure that student learning is optimized. Parallel teaching and

alternative teaching, which emphasize that teachers must plan jointly, are the most widely

encouraged in the local school district. Both models ensure that teachers are delivering

instruction to different groups simultaneously (Tzivinikou, 2015a).

The selection process for becoming a collaborative teacher was also discussed as

one of the concerns of the participants. Several teachers noted that they had negative

views of the process. Teachers believed that they should have more input in how the process is conducted. In Section 1 of this study, teachers from the research site indicated that they often felt forced into becoming a collaborative teacher. Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory emphasizes that learning and collaboration should occur naturally without imposed constraints. Being forced to serve as a collaborative teacher created unnecessary friction and was not conducive to developing a collaborative relationship. The dilemma of being forced to serve as a collaborative teacher assisted in accumulating friction among the collaborative relationships. When asked what they would do better to address this concern, seven of the eight teachers indicated that some form of volunteerism and choice should exist. One of the seven teachers suggested that teachers meet and discuss options for enhancing the collaborative teacher selection process. The suggestion also included inviting one or more of the administrators to the meeting as well.

The findings of the study also showed that some of the opinions held by collaborative teachers stemmed from a lack of training and support by the administrative team. Teachers believed that if administrators modeled how the collaborative process should occur then it would ensure that teachers would be able to successfully collaborate. In this regard, Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory emphasizes that the more individuals interact together on a regular basis for a common goal, then they can learn to achieve better results. As I indicated in Section 1 of this study, one of the initial reasons for pursuing this study was that teachers indicated that often administration provided minimal support due to the overwhelming demands placed on them by the local

school. Charles and Dickens (2012) discussed how effective collaborative planning should involve school leaders given their influential role within the local school.

It was also revealed that teachers believed that a lack of effective planning with their collaborative teacher to communicate and work on lesson plans prevented the teachers from providing an optimum learning environment for both general and special education students. One of the major goals for every school program should be to promote a common time for planning and dialogue on a consistent basis (Theoharis, 2014). By consistently planning together, co-teachers can form a bond of mutual respect so that they can achieve desired instructional goals together (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The achievement of desired instructional goals through effective coteaching has the potential for enhancing the learning opportunities for students and leading to overall student success.

Finally, it is imperative to acknowledge that optimal conditions for general and special education teachers working together collaboratively should be a priority (Milteniene & Venclovaite, 2012). As referenced in Section 1, Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory emphasized that effective collaboration within diverse communities thrives when the priority is to ensure and maintain cohesive relationships. When examining the findings within this study, six out of eight of the participants believed that if they were given a role in the decision-making process to become a collaborative teacher, there would be less misunderstanding and resentment and more team building. The participants also stated that one of their principle concerns was for ongoing support from the administrative team. That support was crucial, and should

begin with extensive professional development that models and highlights the core components of general and special education teachers working together collaboratively to assist a variety of student learners.

Overall, the findings of this study indicated that the participants believed that effective collaboration was lacking in their local middle school. The three themes derived from the data, which included the collaborative teacher experience, the roles of administration in collaboration, and obstacles and optimal conditions for collaboration, suggested that additional discussions and training are necessary to enhance the collaborative setting. Lave and Wenger (1991) suggested that over time, members within a community will formulate knowledge and establish role assignments for the community to thrive. With those principles in mind the results of the data suggest that for teachers to effectively work together in a coteaching setting, additional professional development and communication from administration is necessary.

<div align="center">**Conclusion**</div>

Based on the three major themes highlighted above, I believe that there was enough corroborating data to address the research questions for this study. I sought to develop an in depth understanding of the perceptions and attitudes of a small group of general and special education collaborative teachers in their natural setting. More importantly, the goal of this research was to understand the viewpoint of the participants, not the researcher's perspective (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).

The lesson plans allowed me the opportunity to view and analyze how the teachers' lesson plans reflect collaborative approaches to inclusive instruction (Bogdan &

Biklen, 2006). Of the 16 lesson plans collected, only 7 of them provided a picture of how

instructional practices were differentiated to meet the needs of a diverse group of

learners. Based upon the research questions framing the study and the analyzed data, I

arrived at the three themes discussed in these findings. The themes provided a

framework for gaining greater understanding of the local problem concerning effective

general and special education teacher collaboration and are the basis for the project. As a

result of the findings, there are two outcomes that must be addressed by the project: (a)

teachers lack of collaboration and (b) the disconnect that collaborative teachers

experience with administration. Based upon these outcomes I will provide a 3-day

professional development/training curriculum with supportive materials to include but are

not limited to the purpose, goals, learning outcome, and target audience to address the

concerns of the participants. A 3-day professional development plan is essential to

adequately model and address the collaborative experience.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

The project for this study is a professional development/training curriculum and materials pertaining to and focusing on effective teacher collaboration. The project includes the purpose, goals, learning outcomes, and target audience. It also outlines components, timeline, activities, trainer notes, and module formats. I provide materials (e.g., PowerPoint slides and handouts), implementation plan, and evaluation plan of the project. Finally, I include an hour-by-hour detail of the training—to include 3 days of training at my local school during a designated time approved by the local school principal. This section also includes the rationale, review of literature, and project implications. Please see Appendix A for additional project information and the professional development agenda.

Based upon the results of this study, I concluded that both general and special education teachers believe that a communication gap exists. All the teachers agreed that more professional development is needed to address their concerns and the perceived difficulties of collaborative teaching. Based on the findings, the two outcomes that are addressed by the project are (a) teachers lack of collaboration, and (b) the disconnect that collaborative teachers experience with administration. Based on these outcomes, I concluded that a full 3-day professional development training focusing on effective teacher collaboration to assist the needs of a diverse group of learners would be instrumental in addressing the concerns that exist between the general and special education teachers at the local middle school. The professional development will also

include the involvement of the administrative team, a concern voiced by the majority of the teachers participating in the study. Addressing the communication gaps through peer reviewed researched data will provide optimal ways to assist a diverse group of learners in the collaborative setting.

Description and Goals

The primary goals of this project are to increase efforts to support effective teacher collaboration between general and special education teachers as well as provide research-based professional education development on how collaborative teachers can foster positive communication with the administrative team to assist them in meeting the needs of a growing diverse group of learners. Outcomes based upon the effective implementation of these goals could foster positive perceptions and awareness for future teacher collaborations. Effective teacher collaboration is centered on an atmosphere of continuous communication that often begins with the administrative team. The goal for the administrative team is to ensure that ongoing monthly communication with the collaborative teams is put into effect and executed. The effect of reaching these goals may also result in enhanced student achievement for all learners.

Rationale

I selected a professional development for this project for several reasons. After careful analysis of the data, teacher participants in the study addressed a concern for receiving additional training pertaining to how to effectively collaborate with their co-teachers. According to Tzivinikou (2015b), an essential element in education improvement is by way of professional development for teachers. Secondly, on-going

professional development allows for improvement in teaching skills as well as the effective implementation of strategies for assisting a variety of learners (Tzivinikou, 2015b). Finally, data gathered in my study focused on a lack of involvement from the administrative team. The goal for the administrative team is to provide an opportunity for the teachers to sit with the administrators and brainstorm ways in which administration could support the coteaching process. Therefore, during a half day of the 3-day workshop, the professional development focuses on including the local school principal, assistant principals, and instructional support specialists to serve as ongoing mentors and collaborators throughout the school year. Murawski and Bernhardt (2015) emphasized that coteaching should be viewed as a best practice in education that is ultimately facilitated by leaders in the administrative team.

Review of Literature

The genre I selected to address the problem of this study is a professional development. The literature search process included accessing online libraries, which included the databases EBSCO host and Education Research Complete. The majority of the literature ranged from 2012 to 2016. I used the following search terms: *professional development*, *teacher training*, *general* and *special education teacher training*, *collaboration*, and *administrator's role in collaboration.*

Professional Development

Based on the results of the data analysis of this research study, all the participants agreed that additional training and skill development regarding collaborative teaching were essential. For this study, I developed a 3-day professional development as the

guiding tool for enhancing the collaborative efforts of general and special education teachers. Many educators regard professional development as a key component for ensuring that guidelines are consistent for everyone. Mangope and Mukhopadhyay (2015) described professional development as "systematic efforts to bring about change in the classroom practices, of teachers, in their attitudes and beliefs, and the learning outcomes of students" (p. 61). Therefore, to support inclusivity and effective collaboration, I believe professional development will address the concerns of teachers examined in this study.

According to Woodcock and Hardy (2017), professional development can be either formal (specialized qualifications or traditional workshops and programs) or informal (learning alongside colleagues and lifelong approaches). Professional development for inclusive education may appear in the format of a one-time workshop or an ongoing training to assist in the collaborative teacher efforts (Mangope & Mukhopadhyay, 2015). The professional development developed for this study is a formal one-time workshop for 3 days. Based upon the teacher responses for this study, professional development should also be engaging and include activities that involve the actual participants. Karagiorgi (2012) found that teaching was not an isolated event, but often a collective endeavor where peer observation with the purpose of providing constructive feedback enhanced an entire school community. The process was known as peer observation of teaching and was used as a developmental opportunity activity where professionals offered mutual support by observing each other teach and later engaging in relevant conversations for assisting each other in moving forward. The study's results

showed enhanced professional practice and confidence to deliver instruction to a diverse

group of students (Karagiorgi, 2012). The peer observation of teaching developmental

opportunity will serve as one part of the 3-day professional development activities for

this study.

According to Morel (2014), professional development provides an opportunity for

collaborative teachers to build and enhance interpersonal skills that do not always come

naturally. The building of these skills in the collaborative setting promotes successful

communities of practice, which supports the theoretical framework for this study.

Finally, a middle school study conducted by Doran (2014) also corroborated my use of

Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory, noting that teacher discussions

during professional development training of prior experience and knowledge was useful

in constructing meaningful dialogue, thus, building upon the concept of communities of

practice. According to Doran, ongoing professional development should always be

taking place among teachers due to the ever-evolving realm of education. The National

Staff Development Council also highlighted the importance of establishing learning

communities (Doran, 2014). They published a set of standards to help guide educational

leaders when creating or implementing effective professional development and identified

the following seven components that should be considered when planning for

professional learning: (a) learning communities that meet on a regular basis for active

engagement, (b) leadership that works collaboratively to ensure that ongoing workshops

consistently take place, (c) resources that are allocated wisely, (d) using data to inform

student learning, (e) learning designs that take into consideration learning theories and

active teacher engagement, (f) implementation of newly learned skills supported through

peer observation and leadership, and (g) outcomes that are aligned to curriculum

standards (Lutrick & Szabo, 2012)

Teachers' Beliefs about Professional Development

Professional development is a significant strategy to ensure that inclusive

education is successful (Baldiris et al., 2016). The way teachers embrace professional

development that involves inclusivity is associated with how confident they feel about

managing students with diverse learning abilities in collaborative settings (Mangope &

Mukhopadhyay, 2015). Mangope and Mukhopadhyay (2015) emphasized that if teachers

are not invested or clear about the relevance of the professional development, they will be

less likely to implement the information received. Teachers are more prone to be

receptive to professional development when the designers take into consideration the

teachers' values, beliefs, and training needs as well as attending to in-service modalities

and delivery method (Mangope & Mukhopadhyay, 2015). Teacher bias and a lack of

understanding about inclusivity can prevent the effective execution of newly learned

information. Therefore, teachers must be made aware of how and why inclusive

practices can impact the learning environment (Mangope & Mukhopadhyay, 2015).

Teacher Training and Preparation for Effective Collaboration

Due to the increasing number of diverse learners within the field of education, it

is essential that effective teacher collaboration exist in the local schools to support all

students (Aliakbari & Bazyar, 2012). Ongoing collaborative teacher training and

professional development will enhance teacher knowledge for assisting all learners

including those with special needs. One of the most significant components for educating students with special needs is collaboration between general and special education teachers to maximize opportunities for success for the students with disabilities (Tzivinikou, 2015). The professional development created for this study will provide an opportunity for collaborative teachers to dialogue about ways to enhance the collaborative teacher experience and ensure that all students are provided with the opportunity to be successful. It is also important to note that certification guidelines for all collaborative classroom teachers in the field of education emphasize that it is necessary that teachers have a working knowledge of the laws that affect students with disabilities. Therefore, it is a best practice that general and special education teachers who work together collaboratively attend professional development to enhance their skills for implementing strategies to assist all learners (O'Connor, Yasik, & Homer, 2016). The use of combined teacher expertise in a collaborative environment ensures that a wide variety of student deficits are targeted (Prizeman, 2015).   The professional development proposed in this study incorporates opportunities for collaborative teachers to display their knowledge of how to use strategies that will assist all learners.

Collaborative Lesson Planning and Implementation to Ensure Compliance

One way for teachers to succeed in collaborative settings is to have common planning time where there is opportunity to dialogue and share curriculum resources significant to student success (Gradwell & DiCamillo, 2013). These efforts would require that general and special education teachers establish ongoing dialogue and planning sessions for meeting the needs of all learners (Petersen, 2016). Pălăşan and

Henter (2015) highlighted two positive attributes that can derive from the effective collaboration of general and special education teachers planning together, (a) the development and cohesion of new ideas and (b) the emergence of future teacher trainers and leaders to assist and inform the next generation.

Collaborative teachers must also ensure that they are in compliance with state and federal guidelines for assisting students with IEPs. In many collaborative classrooms, teachers have consistently reported that they remain unsure how to specifically provide accommodations to students with special needs and often resort to just providing whole classroom versus individualized support, which results in not effectively implementing the students legally documented IEP (Scanlon & Baker, 2012). The effective implementation of a student's IEP is a very relevant topic that general and special education collaborative teachers must discuss to ensure compliance. This topic requires ongoing professional development such as the one developed in this study.

Administrative Roles in Collaboration

Another area of concern by participants focused on the roles and supports provided by the school administration pertaining to teacher collaboration. School leaders are considered to be highly influential in establishing the vision and climate for inclusive school settings (Theoharis & Causton, 2014). In the collaborative setting, there are mandates put in place to ensure that students with disabilities are supported (Nichols & Sheffield, 2014). According to Theoharis and Causton (2014), local states have outlined how effective teacher collaboration in education should look.

Inclusion requires that the collaborative efforts of general and special education teachers, inclusive practices, and on-going staff development must be implemented by the administrative team (Nichols & Sheffield, 2014). Many principals tend to agree that ongoing interest-driven professional development plays an essential role in assisting their local teachers in making informed decisions regarding a diverse group of students (Lutrick & Szabo, 2012). Another study noted that administrators analyzed how inclusive practices were implemented in their local school settings, which set the stage for creating an inclusion plan (Nichols &Sheffield, 2014). According to Friend (2015), principals should look for the traditional indicators that both teachers have a strong partnership and that the instructional environment is supportive. But they should also look for evidence that teachers are familiar with how to effectively implement the strategies and supportive techniques of a student's IEP that will ensure goal achievement.

Administrators are also encouraged to take into consideration teachers' cultural needs, experiences, and even interests when making collaborative teacher team assignments within the local school setting coupled with district mandates (Doran, 2014). In addition, local school leaders have been given the charge to acknowledge and address concerns or conflicts that have the probability of arising expeditiously. Addressing concerns quickly will assist in setting the tone for a positive instructional environment that puts students first (Nichols & Sheffield, 201). In a study conducted by Lutrick and Szabo (2012), the researchers noted that the best way to show improvement in the process of teaching is through professional development that is ideally facilitated by members of the administrative team.

Compliance of legal mandates is a primary role for school administrators. However, they must also ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are being met in the collaborative classrooms (Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014). Teachers who service students diagnosed with disabilities should possess the knowledge of how any disability may manifest within the instructional environment. According to Ball and Green (2014), collaborative teachers must also understand the laws and researched strategies surrounding the implementation plan for assisting the needs of a student with a disability. Just as general and special education teachers look to administration to provide guidance within the school regarding collaboration, administrators also believe that there are certain qualities that their teachers should possess: (a) a thorough understanding of the law regarding special education students , (b)flexibility and willingness to mentor their colleagues when necessary, and (c) special educators should be advocates in minimizing conflict and keep parents well informed of the collaborative process for educating their child (Steinbrecher, Fix, Mahal, Serna, & Mckeown, 2015). Administrators often use professional development opportunities such as the one developed for this study to communicate their expectations regarding collaborative teaching efforts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is essential to emphasize why the role of professional development is such a critical tool for ensuring effective teacher collaboration. Research continues to remain a major component for assisting educators in building effective communication in the collaborative setting (Lutrick & Szabo, 2012). The role that

administration can play in a local school setting can be pivotal to ensure that the

modeling of positive teacher collaboration to assist a diverse group of learners is

implemented effectively.

Implementation

After sharing with the local school principal the plans for my project study, she

agreed that our local school was in need of staff development. The principal also stated

that data from the last several years have revealed that deficit areas continue to exist

within our collaborative teams on each of the grade levels (sixth, seventh, and eighth).

The research data that I collected corroborated that deficits still exist within the local

school. We discussed possible time frames for the implementation of the professional

development. Ideally, the professional development should take place during the first

week of school. This option may not be the best due to a full week of existing activities

on a district and local level taking place. A second option will be to implement the

professional development within the first semester of school (suggested by the principal).

The 3 days of professional development would take place over a 3-week period during a

specified day of the week. Substitute teachers would be in place for each of the

collaborative participants (seven teachers for each grade level). The implementation of

the project would also allow teacher participants to earn professional development credit

for the school year.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

I will serve as the primary facilitator of the project, however there are also

instructional support specialists assigned to each grade level that I will ask to assist me in

facilitating the planned activities. The training will take place in the local media center because the training requires access and use of technology. Teacher participants will need and have access to laptops and table space for working together in pairs or groups. The administrative team is not scheduled to participate all 3 days. The local school principal and assistant principal will serve as the main source for communicating the time, dates, and attendance expectations of the professional development. I will also create individual notebooks for each of the participants to store the documents and information that they will be receiving throughout the entire session. Teachers will be reminded to bring their notebooks with them for each training session. There will be light snacks available during the break and teachers and facilitator assistants will be encouraged to either bring their lunch or take part in a pot luck style dining.

Potential Barriers

The media center will be closed for the specific training days, however, there is the possibility that other teachers may enter the center. To address this concern, I will request that one of the instructional support specialists monitor and discourage nonparticipants from interacting with those in the training session. Another potential barrier is the distraction of random announcements over the intercom throughout the day. Participants in the training will be made aware of the possible random announcements before the training starts. Finally, I do anticipate that there will be some educators who believe that the training is not really geared towards them and that it is a waste of time for them. In this instance, I will ask that a member of our administrative team discuss the

facts pertaining to the local districts stance on effective teacher collaboration and how every educator should be prepared to serve a variety of student learners.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

The elements that will be incorporated into the 3-day professional development training are designed to support the local school/district vision of effective teacher collaboration. The training will take place over a 3-day time frame. The agenda for Day 1 is to discuss the purpose for the professional development training. All participants will have the opportunity to introduce themselves. A PowerPoint presentation discussing the aspects of coteaching will be demonstrated. Teachers will also engage in "must have conversations" that accompany the Power Point presentation. Also on Day 1, a discussion of the preferred teaching models will be discussed and demonstrated. Day 2 of the training will begin with a quick review of Day 1 that includes participants playing a game about teacher collaboration. Day 2 will also include a discussion on understanding specific student disabilities, recognizing the essential components of classroom management within the collaborative setting. Day 2 will conclude with the participants being paired to create a kviable collaborative lesson plan. On Day 3 of the professional development, participants will present an overview of the lesson plans that were created on Day 2. The second half of Day 3 will involve critical dialogue between teachers and the administrative team to discuss key issues pertaining to collaborative teaching.

Roles and Responsibilities of Facilitator and Others

My role and responsibilities pertaining to the project are to facilitate the 3-day professional development and to ensure that the findings are presented to the local administrative team and collaborative teachers as deemed necessary. I will also assist in ensuring that there is follow up to implementing the goals established at the 3-day professional development training. Instructional support specialists will assist me in facilitating the overall training. Their roles will be to work with their assigned grade level of teachers on a weekly basis to ensure that common collaborative planning time is taking place. The participants will also include the 12 general education teachers and 9 special education teachers at the school. Their roles will be to attend the professional development as well as bring new ideas and suggestions pertaining to collaboration. There will be at least one administrator for each day of training, the principal will make an appearance on all three training days, but is expected to be much more involved on Day 3 of the training. The role of the administrative team will be to support and assist in the execution of the plan that is established at the professional development.

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Project Evaluation

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The evaluation for this project will be goal based. Bandura (1977) emphasized that goal based evaluations have the end results in mind. Teachers are more likely to embrace professional development when they believe that the outcome will improve their professional practice. The goals that need to be achieved will be clearly stated throughout the professional development training. Based on the outcomes mentioned above, the primary goals of this project are to (a) provide researched based professional

development that supports the collaborative teacher process and (b) to improve the disconnect that collaborative teachers experience with administration. These goals will be achieved by implementing a monthly plan that will reinforce the concepts and strategies learned during the professional development training.

The first goal will be accomplished upon the completion of the 3-day professional development training. Upon completion of the training, all participants will be asked to complete a Collaborative Teacher Feedback Form (see Appendix A) that I will review along with the administrative team. The purpose of the Collaborative Teacher Feedback Form is to gather data from the participants' perspectives on what they learned in the training as well as how to move forward in strengthening collaborative relations with their co-teacher and the administrative team to assist a diverse group of learners. The information obtained from the feedback form will be used to create a weekly collaborative meeting monitoring form.

The second goal will involve the weekly collaborative meeting monitoring form that will be collaboratively created by the administrative team and the collaborative teachers after the professional development workshop is completed to monitor how collaborative teacher and administration relations are progressing. The monitoring form is not included in this study because it cannot be created until after the Collaborative Teacher Feedback Forms are reviewed by the administrative team. I along with the teacher support specialists will facilitate the process of reviewing the Collaborative Teacher Feedback Forms as well as the creation of the weekly monitoring form within the first two weeks after the professional development takes place. The meetings will be

held after the weekly staff meeting and include the administrative team. In the weeks to follow, the results of the weekly monitoring form will be taken back to the administrative team by the teacher support specialists. The administrative team will address each grade level collaborative team during their weekly planning times because each grade level planning is different. The ultimate goal is to ensure that collaborative teacher relations are improving and enhancing the instructional setting in support of learners. It is important to note that both goals are aligned with the district's teacher evaluation system that holds teachers accountable for specific performance criteria, formally known as Teacher Keys.

Implications Including Social Change

Local Community

The implications of implementing this collaborative teacher project study have the potential to be wide ranging (Prizeman, 2015). The local community has changed considerably due to new socioeconomic conditions of parents and students. Students diagnosed with developmental, behavior, and learning disabilities have more than doubled within the local school and district. The focus on effective teacher collaboration ensures that all stakeholders within the community are putting the needs of students first. According to Schwab, Holzinger, Krammer, Gebhardt, and Hessels (2015), students can benefit from effective teacher collaboration. A major asset is the lower student to teacher ratio, which allows for more individualized instruction time per student.   Parents as well as other stakeholders believe that their child's education depends on the quality of collaboration of special and general education teachers (Schwab et al., 2015).

Far-Reaching

The effective implementation of this project has the potential to influence other stakeholders within the district to focus on team building through improved teacher collaboration. It is also essential to note that effective change is sometimes achieved through confronting and dealing with formidable challenge (Reglin, Royster, & Losike-Sedimo, 2014). Therefore, the local school has the opportunity to serve as a catalyst for other schools in the district by implementing and modeling how collaborative teacher professional development can positively support student learning.

Conclusion

The professional development project presented in this section represents the concerns expressed by general and special education teachers for training initiatives to support collaboration in a coteaching setting. The needs of the local community are rapidly changing; therefore, it is essential that coteaching partners are adequately prepared to assume responsibility for instructing all students (Nichols & Sheffield, 2014). The literature review in this section highlights peer reviewed research that will assist in developing the project. A 3-day professional development was created to address the concerns of general and special education teachers who work together collaboratively. The training is designed to promote positive, meaningful interaction between collaborative teachers and the administrative team. Areas of focus for building a community of practice will include understanding the concept of collaboration, the needs of students in the collaborative setting, lesson plan writing and implementation, and the integral role of administration in the collaborative process. The intended result of these

collaborative efforts will assist teachers in building positive collaborative relations while

supporting all learners (Pălășan & Henter, 2015).

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

In the ever-evolving field of education, understanding and meeting the needs of a diverse group of learners including those students diagnosed with disabilities has become the norm for local, district, and state school systems (McAnaney & Wynne, 2016). Many students diagnosed with disabilities must receive services in instructional settings that include their general education peers. For inclusive classroom practices to be successful, general and special education teachers must collaborate daily. These coteaching partnerships require extensive ongoing professional development that must be supported by administrators, parents, and local community stakeholders (Nichols & Sheffield, 2014). In this study I explored the perceptions and attitudes of general and special education teachers working together in collaborative settings to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners, which include students diagnosed with disabilities. The study results indicated that there was a diminished level of teacher communication and camaraderie between the general and special education teacher in the collaborative setting. Overall, teacher participants felt as though they needed additional professional development and support from the local administration in order to address the challenges they faced. Based upon these results and the guidance of peer reviewed research, I created a 3-day professional development training to address the needs of the participants.

In this final section of the project study, I address the project strengths, make recommendations for remediation of limitations, and present alternate ways to address the

problem. I will also discuss the areas of scholarship, project development, leadership and

change, and self-analysis. Next, I address the project's potential for social change and

the implications for future research. Finally, I provide the overall conclusion of the

study.

Project Strengths

There are several strengths that I believe will contribute to the success of this

project. First, the deficits that existed in the collaborative teacher setting have led to long

overdue conversations. Second, the project addressed communication failures that

continue to exist among general and special education teachers who serve students with

disabilities. Third, the principal at the local school has committed to ensuring that

teacher collaboration will remain a topic of discussion with administration. The topic is

important because many collaborative teachers have felt that administration should play a

more active role in the collaborative teacher process. This commitment has been

documented and noted in our weekly staff meetings. Finally, it is important to note that

the 3-day professional development training has already been approved by the principal

at the local school and is awaiting a calendar date for implementation prior to the end of

the first semester. These decisions made by the principal validate the commitment to

strengthen the collaborative teacher process.

Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations

One of the limitations of addressing the local problem is the initial

implementation of the 3-day professional development. The reason this is a limitation is

because the project may not begin until weeks after the start of school due to other

trainings that are already on the agenda. Allowing the opportunity for a full 3-day professional development to take place has the potential of improving collaborative relations between general and special education teachers early in the school year. Another possible limitation is that time constraints may hinder the administrative team from having the opportunity to follow up with collaborative teacher concerns in a timely manner.

Alternate Ways to Address the Problem

One alternate way to address the problem of ineffective teacher collaboration is to invite collaborative teaching team experts in the local county who have been validated by the school district as role models for collaboration to participate in dialogue about the collaborative teacher experience. This discussion would have the potential for creating a sense of parity among the teachers and allows for all voices to be heard. This dialogue could also assist in addressing concerns for establishing ongoing discussions regarding collaborative teaching with administration. Friend (2015) also suggests that collaborative teachers should observe successful collaborative teaching pairs and afterwards have a dialogue with the teachers being observed about effective collaboration. Their knowledge and skills can provide insight into forming and strengthening collaborative bonds. Teachers who observe collaborative teaching teams would complete a Coteaching Observation Form highlighting essential features of the lesson and teacher interaction among the students (see Appendix A). The suggestion is that the observations take place once a month on a purely voluntary basis to ensure that there are no contractual problems with the teachers involved. Substitute teachers would not be necessary because the

observations could take place during teacher planning periods. Successful collaborative teams would be determined by the local school principal.

Scholarship

In addition to ensuring that the problem is addressed effectively, the scholarly manner in which the problem is delivered must also be highlighted. According to Stewart (2015), educators generate knowledge about the teaching practice through developing participatory networks of research and scholarship on teacher collaboration. The ability to collect and examine information vital to this study, but to also meticulously synthesize it, was for me an intimidating experience. To synthesize in this perspective meant that I had to gather and read information with a critical eye. Critical reading helped me to expand my thinking beyond my own experiences and to form a different approach for understanding collaboration from a variety of peer reviewed sources. What I gained from the process was lifelong knowledge that has taught me the significance of constructing meaning from data gathered from a multitude of sources.

Project Development and Evaluation

As my knowledge and understanding of the development of this project study expanded, so did my insights for developing the project. In the past, assisting or even taking the lead position in project developments at my local school has been the norm for me. I have also been a part of several committees where professional development activities have been designed for teachers. Developing the competencies of teacher interaction ensures a more effective approach for them working with students diagnosed with specific disabilities (Baldiris et al., 2016). However, taking on this project helped to

heighten my awareness of the complexities of making sure that all areas of the analyzed data were addressed in the professional development. Although the focus of the study emphasized teacher perceptions of collaboration, it also highlighted the teacher's perceptions of the role of administration in the collaborative teacher process. For this reason, I felt it necessary to include this component in the literature review as well as the 3-day professional development training.

<div align="center">**Leadership and Change**</div>

This project focused on building teacher collaboration in the collaborative setting. I chose to support the mission by creating professional development that addresses many of the concerns of the research participants. Lutrick (2012) emphasized that leadership acknowledges that professional development is essential to the discipline of collaborative teaching. As one of the leaders in the local school, I believe that it is important for me to be a catalyst for change when necessary. Therefore, working on this project has empowered me to act as a sounding board for those who may remain silent. It has also made me more sensitive to understanding the different views of both the general and special education teachers. The hardest part of the process was realizing that leadership often comes with rejection and isolation. There were times throughout the process when I struggled to obtain a meeting with the local administration due to time constraints and my own workload. I was also not sure how the administrative team would feel about participating in a collaborative teacher professional development. However, once I explained my vision, the new principal embraced it and provided approval immediately

for my project to move forward. Data suggest that most administrators are in favor of

professional development to enhance teacher performance (Lutrick, 2012).

Analysis of Self as Scholar

The most significant aspect that I have learned about myself as a scholar is

tenacity. There have been many occasions when I felt like a failure at this process, yet I

was determined to continue. The task was at times intimidating. In times of despair, I

learned that I only wanted to give up when I did not have enough knowledge to move

forward. Therefore, the more I refined my research efforts, the more effective I became

in moving to the next phase of the writing process. According to Jalongo, Boyer, and

Ebbeck (2014), becoming a scholar requires the ability to be able to take the research and

knowledge acquired to assist in critically synthesizing information to support the results

of the data.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

As previously stated, scholarly writing requires ongoing knowledge development.

Boyer (1991) suggested that a great teacher is one who is learned. Throughout this

process, I have discovered that self-reflection and learning are processes that continually

take place for me as an educator. Reflecting on how this process has changed me from a

novice researcher to desiring to be a lifelong learner has encouraged me to begin thinking

about my next project. In analyzing myself as a practitioner, it became evident to me that

the more knowledge I acquired, the more I sought to develop a deeper understanding of a

particular phenomenon. Teaching and learning also became interchangeable activities.

When delivering or preparing for my weekly lessons for students, I became much more

deliberate about seeking engaging peer-reviewed data to support student and also adult

learning.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

When I initially began developing the project for this study, I felt intimidated.

However, as I progressed, I allowed the process to flow as I based each component on the

needs that were communicated to me by the participants in the study. I used the analyzed

data to guide the project contents. The participants focused on three main areas: (a)

lesson plan writing, (b) administrative support, and (c) roles and responsibilities. I made

sure that each of these areas was discussed in the professional development plan. I used

peer reviewed literature to guide me in establishing best practices when creating the

professional development agenda. Developing the project also provided me with a

greater awareness of how many other educators are struggling with collaborative

teaching. According to Gehrke, Cocchiarella, Harris, and Puckett (2014), preparing

teachers to be effective in the collaborative classroom is now a global and international

concern. Lastly, when developing the project, I was constantly reflecting on the

importance of engaging adult learners by integrating ways to ensure they are involved in

the project implementation. Teachers, including myself, have often contended that they

receive and retain more information when they are active participants during professional

development trainings (Friend, 2015).

The Project's Potential for Social Change

This project's potential impact on social change at the local level and beyond can

be far reaching. If implemented appropriately and followed through with consistency,

this project could possibly become a catalyst for other teachers and schools struggling

with ineffective teacher collaboration. The participants of this study emphasized that

they have a desire to build positive relations with their co-teachers if provided with the

appropriate tools and supports. School principals must be the gatekeepers for ensuring

that proactive measures for establishing and cultivating a school culture of positive

teacher collaboration is put in place (Sumbera et al., 2014). Principals are essential in

guiding the atmosphere of the school. If the principal supports the efforts of

collaborative teaching teachers are more likely to respond positively about the issue as

well (Friend, 2015).

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The participants in my study made it clear that they felt inadequate handling the

concerns that involved ineffective communication in the collaborative setting. By

informing the administrative team about the collaborative teacher concerns, there is a

possibility that ongoing professional development and training will be put in place to

address the deficit areas. This study's implications could also lead to future research

opportunities to enhance collaborative teacher relations throughout the local school,

district, and other school districts.

In my study, I interviewed middle school teachers at one school; future research

could include studying the collaborative process among elementary and high school

teachers within the same school district or teachers in other school districts. One of the

outcomes of this study was the reported disconnect between co-teachers and

administrators. Future research could focus on the collaborative process from the

administrators' perspective to address how administrators can better support the collaborative teacher process. Additional research could include surveying students in inclusion classrooms in the local school about their experiences, seeking information to improve the collaborative process from their perspective. Surveying students is important because as noted in my teacher interviews students are often aware of when co-teachers have not collaborated.

Establishing and maintaining effective teacher collaboration is an ongoing process for building positive communities in practice. Future peer-reviewed research and professional development that could focus on collaborative teacher relations may serve as a catalyst in the local and district schools for enhancing the collaborative teacher experience. Finally, I believe that researchers should also consider using social media and technology to distribute surveys and feedback forms to gather information from general and special education teachers regarding their experiences in the collaborative teacher process.

Conclusion

In the research conducted for this study I examined the concerns of general and special education teachers working in the collaborative instructional setting at a local middle school. Results from the study established that working in an inclusive classroom requires more than basic training and protocols. It requires ongoing communication that will assist in establishing and maintaining positive teacher camaraderie (Petersen, 2016). Participants also concluded that the support of the administrative team, especially the principal, is critical in guiding the overall collaborative teacher experience. At this

particular stage, I am very close to implementing the 3-day training outlined in this study.

The local school principal realizes the lack of collaboration and has provided information

that training is forthcoming. Throughout this entire process, I have grown tremendously

as an educator, a scholar, and a leader. I will continue to be a voice for teacher

collaboration and encourage, inform, and provide guidance for new and veteran teachers.

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Appendix A: Final Project

Purpose

Based on the results of this study, I concluded that a communication disparity exists between general and special education teachers who work together collaboratively. This project is designed to address those concerns.

Professional Development Goals

The primary goals of this project are to increase efforts to support effective teacher collaboration and to provide research-based professional education development on how collaborative teachers can best meet the needs of diverse group of students.

Learning Outcomes

The learning outcomes may include but are not limited to the following:

- Increased effective instructional strategies in the collaborative setting.

- Increased communication with collaborative teachers and administration.

- Increased knowledge of collaborative classroom expectations.

- Ongoing professional development.

Target Audience

All general and special education collaborative teachers in grade levels 6th-8th

All administrative team members in grade levels 6-8

Local and district middle schools

<u>Introduction to the Project</u>

In a local middle school in Georgia, my study revealed a communication disparity

between general and special education collaborative teachers. Many of their concerns

emphasize a lack of knowledge about effective planning and instructional

implementation. Another area of concern involves a lack of support from the

administrative team at the local school. This professional development is designed to

address these concerns by providing essential components on collaboration that will

assist general and special education teachers to meet the needs of a diverse group of

learners.

Professional Development Agenda

Bridging the Academic Gap for Students with Disabilities through Effective Teacher

Collaboration /Day 1

8:30-9:00   Upon arrival participants will write their names and years teaching on
name tags.
Welcome from facilitator and administration (administration will leave
after welcome remarks given and return again on Day 3 after lunch).
Discuss purpose for training (facilitator).
M&M ICE BREAKER (Pull an M&M out of the bag/read and answer the
question associated with that color in your own way)

9:00-9:15   Teachers will use sticky notes provided to describe one "like" and one
"dislike" they have about coteaching/collaboration---place the notes on the
display panel / I will read responses aloud.

9:15-9:30   Discuss similarities and differences in responses/ I will form a chart for
display to visually compare the responses.

9:30-10:00   PowerPoint: What is coteaching/collaboration/Create a KWL Chart
(K= Know) (W=Want to know) (L=What we Learned)
Discuss how coteaching aligns to the district/local school mission.
Discuss the relevance of special education in collaboration
What does the research say about collaboration?

10:00-10:15   Teachers discuss how they believe an effective collaborative relationship
should look. Two live demonstrations of effective and noneffective
collaborative relationships demonstrated by the teacher support specialists
and me.
Discussion about the live demonstrations---What were the "Take Aways?"

10:15-10:30   **15-minute break**

10:30-11:00   Participants are asked to pair with their co-teachers and provided with a
handout on "MUST HAVE CONVERSATIONS". Co-teachers should
complete as many of the sections as possible within the allotted time.

11:00-11:30   Each co-teacher pair will share their responses to two or three of the
sections from the "MUST HAVE CONVERSATIONS" handout based
upon the dialogue they had with their co-teacher. They will also discuss

what the experience of participating in the "must have conversations" was like. The interactions will take place in the whole group setting.

11:30-12:30   **Break for lunch**

12:30-1:30   PowerPoint: (Provides a visual overview of descriptions about the preferred teaching models). A discussion about the preferred teaching models for the district/local school /live demonstrations facilitated by the instructional support specialists and me. The teachers will play the role of students.

1:30-2:30   Participants are asked to divide in groups of four/ they will be given scenarios about teaching models and asked to identify and provide an explanation of which teaching model the scenario is referencing.

2:30-2:45   Questions, Concerns, Comments. This segment is guided by the facilitator and instructional coaches. Teacher participants will be asked to share aspects of the professional development that they felt was most rewarding for them.

Professional Development Agenda

Bridging the Academic Gap for Students with Disabilities through Effective Teacher

Collaboration /Day 2

8:30-9:00   Meet and Greet time
All Participants will be provided with a blank copy of the "must have conversations" handout that was discussed the day before. The goal of this activity is to find out if participants can recall the responses given by their co-teachers on Day 1. Participants will approach and record the names of 5 teachers who are not on their grade level. They may select any 5 topics to ask questions about. They should only ask one question per teacher. In the end, their response sheet should only contain 5 answers. The answers should mirror the responses they gave to their co-teacher on Day 1. Only a few responses will be shared based upon time allowed.

9:00-9:30   Day 1 Recap/Clear up concerns and misconceptions guided by me. I will ask for volunteers first to discuss or ask for clarity to topics discussed the day before. There will also be review questions based on information learned on day 1. The review questions will be placed in a bowl that I will pull from to generate responses.

9:30- 10:30   I will facilitate a discussion on a variety of student disabilities (e.g., specific learning disability, emotional behavior disorder, and autism) and classroom management. Collaborative teachers will discuss how the disability is manifested in the classroom, strategies for instructing students with disabilities, and how to provide rewards/consequences for students with behavior concerns Teachers will be called upon to read segments from the large active board describing a variety of student disabilities.

10:30-10:45   **15-minute break**

10:45-11:00   Participants will divide up into teams of three. Using the information learned from the active board regarding student disabilities and classroom management, each team will have to create and then "role play" a 3 to 5-minute scenario of an assigned disability. The onlooker participants will be asked to guess which disability was role played and explain why they chose their particular answer choice. This activity assists in reinforcing information learned about student disabilities.

11:00-12:00 The facilitator will review an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The IEP will include insight into a student's disability. Teachers will have an opportunity to ask questions throughout the presentation.

12:00-1:00 **Break for lunch**

1:00-2:30 LESSON PLAN CREATION
Teachers will be given instructions that they will complete a lesson plan with their co-teacher. Teachers will be provided with the local school collaborative lesson plan template as well as an observation feedback form (feedback will be provided by collaborative teacher peers).

I, along with the teacher support specialists will model how effective collaborative lesson plans and delivery should look using a plan that has already been created.

Each pair of collaborative teachers will work together to create a lesson plan for their particular subject area. Each subject area will be provided with a particular topic. For example: math collaborative teachers create a lesson on "probability." Teachers are already familiar with lesson plan contents and should use the lesson plan template as their gauge for ensuring that all information is completed.

Collaborative teachers should be creative and incorporate any pertinent information learned over the last two days into their lesson plans. For example: include ways to differentiate the lesson for students with behavior and learning disabilities. Include the coteaching model used. The lesson plan template will have the necessary components that need to be filled in. Presentations should be no longer than 15 minutes.

The lessons will be presented on Day 3 of the training agenda with feedback provided by collaborative teacher peers.

2:30-2:45 Questions/Concerns/Misconceptions. This segment is guided by the facilitator and instructional coaches. Participants will be given an opportunity to ask questions or gain additional clarity for upcoming assignments during the training session.

Professional Development Agenda

Bridging the Academic Gap for Students with Disabilities through Effective Teacher

Collaboration /Day 3

8:30-9:00   Meet and Greet time –As teachers enter the room they will be asked to put their name on a ticket and place it in the container provided. Several names will be drawn to receive door prizes.

9:00-10:30   I along with the teacher support specialists will facilitate the collaborative lesson plan presentations. Teachers will teach lesson plans that were created with their co-teachers on the day prior in front of their peers. Volunteers are welcome to go first or names will be drawn from a container. Peer Observations and feedback will be provided after each presentation using the Coteaching Observation Form. Peers are looking to see if elements of the observation form were evident in the presentation. Peers are looking for evidence of effective teacher collaboration. Peers are providing positive and constructive feedback.

Participant observers will be given the local school collaborative lesson plan template that displays the basic criteria that should be evident during instructional delivery. They will be asked to complete a Coteaching Observation Form, which appears in Appendix A during the mini lesson. Areas of opportunity not evident during the presentation should also be noted on the form. A maximum of two teacher participants will provide feedback per every presentation to ensure that all presentations are given adequate time. All criteria on the lesson plan template and observation form is aligned with the Teacher Keys evaluation system used by administrative personnel.

10:30-10:45   **15-minute break**

10:45-12:15   Collaborative Lesson Plan Presentations continued.
Peer Observations and Administrative Feedback provided after each.

Participant observers will be given a collaborative lesson plan template that displays the basic criteria that should be evident during instructional delivery. They will be asked to complete the Coteaching Observation Form during the mini lesson. Areas of opportunity not evident during the presentation should also be noted on the form. A maximum of two teacher participants will provide feedback per every presentation to ensure that all presentations are given adequate time. All criteria on the lesson plan

template and observation form is aligned with the Teacher Keys evaluation system used by administrative personnel.

12:15-1:00   **Break for lunch (Administrators return after lunch)**

1:00-1:15   The facilitator will provide participants with sticky notes to anonymously answer the following question: "What role do you believe that administration should play when it comes to teacher collaboration and planning?" (Comments are charted on large paper).

The intended outcome from this activity is that teachers will have an opportunity to voice their sentiments about why administrative support is critical to them as evidenced by the data analysis

1:15-2:15   Members of the administrative team respond to participants' sticky notes comments/ Back and forth dialogue between teachers and administrators continue. The dialogue during this session will be facilitator driven. Teachers will be directed to write concerns regarding teacher collaboration on sticky notes and give them to the facilitator who will read the concerns aloud randomly. The principal and members of the administrative team will address the concerns in an open forum. Teachers will be given an opportunity to dialogue about responses. The intended outcome of this forum is that administrators will gain insight on how to support collaborative teachers through professional engagement. Teachers will gain insight on what the administrative team is looking to see during collaborative teacher classroom observations.

2:15-2:30   A discussion on what the research states regarding administrative roles and collaborative teacher efforts and expectations. I will distribute several peer-reviewed articles to participants for them to skim and discuss openly, while allowing teachers to provide feedback pertaining to the contents of the articles.

2:30-2:45   Administration discusses expectations of collaborative teams. The intended outcome is that collaborative teachers will have the opportunity to clear up any misconceptions regarding what the administrative observers will be looking for when they enter collaborative classrooms.

2:45-3:00   Administrators and teachers form a pact of ongoing support. This pact will be "verbally stated" initially. After the principal has had an opportunity to review the Collaborative Teacher Feedback Forms, she will present a written plan of support to the collaborative team teachers. The plan of support will be monitored weekly. Monthly discussion meetings

will be scheduled and documented for all collaborative teachers to review the progress of ongoing collaborative teacher relationships.

3:00-3:15 The facilitator will conduct a "Recap" of the high points and significance of the 3-day event. Participants will discuss what the "take-aways" are.

3:15-3:30 Teachers complete the Collaborative Teacher Feedback Form before leaving. Feedback forms will be provided to the facilitator.

MUST-HAVE CONVERSATIONS (Partial List)

In order for coteaching to be effective, team members must be respectful, aware, and supportive of each other's expectations centered on learning and teaching. Because expectations can vary, it is essential to reach a consensus on the way the co-taught class will function.

EXPECTATION	CONSENSUS after discussion
Parity/Equity	
How will you introduce yourselves to students and parents? Both teachers must be on time and remain together for the entire period Both teachers should review IEP and student data together Both teachers lead the class and work with all students	
Classroom space	
Where does each teacher place their things? Desks? Chairs? Bookshelves? Files? Where are the supplies kept? How often does the special ed teacher come into the class?	
Classroom routines	
How does each teacher feel about the following?: Student movement Noise level Student cleanliness General Housekeeping	
Organizational Routines	
Taking attendance Classroom entry Pencil Sharpening Leaving during class Hand raising	
Instructional Routines	
When students first arrive Hands on activities Group work or independent	

COTEACHING OBSERVATION FORM

(complete during lesson plan presentations)

Date: _____

Co-Teacher 1: _____**Co-Teacher 2:**_____

Subject: _____

Lesson Objectives:

Standards Addressed:

Circle the Coteaching Model(s) Used:

    Station   **Parallel**   **Alternative**   **None Observed**

Explain/ justify how you identified the coteaching model that you circled above

Describe what took place and the roles of the co-teachers during the <u>OPENING</u>

Describe what took place and the roles of the co-teachers during the <u>WORK SESSION</u>

Describe what took place and the roles of the co-teachers during the <u>CLOSING</u>

COTEACHING OBSERVATION FORM (cont'd)

Describe the differentiation strategies used by the co-teachers during the lesson

Describe how the co-teachers addressed behavior concerns before, during, or after the lesson

Identify any additional comments or concerns that you observed about the lesson

Co-Teacher 1:_____Co-Teacher 2:_____

Describe what you believe was done effectively during the lesson		
Describe areas that you believe could be improved upon		

Collaborative Teacher Feedback Form
(Please base all responses on the collaborative teacher 3-day professional development)

What do you believe is essential for general and special education teachers to do in order to achieve **effective collaboration** that will assist all students in being successful?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

What are your thoughts regarding the **"MUST HAVE CONVERSATIONS"** segment? Please elaborate

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Which of the **preferred teaching models** do you believe is the most effective and why?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Please provide feedback on the **co-teacher lesson plan creation/peer observation.**

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Please provide feedback regarding the dialogue between the **administration** and **collaborative teachers.**

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Was this professional development helpful? Why or Why not?

_____
_____
_____
_____

MISSION

The mission of the Dekalb County School District is to ensure student success, leading to higher education, work, and life-long learning

Goal Area I emphasizes: Student Success with Equity and Access

Improve student's mastery of learning standards

Provide equitable access to academically rigorous courses and programs

Increase the graduation rate for all students

_____

Due to their diverse learning styles, students diagnosed with a particular disability often require the support of **both the** general **and** special education teachers (including those students who are "consultative", 504, or that may receive services for speech)

TSC Standards :1, 3, 4 will be the primary focus of the presentation

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What is the goal and/or purpose of teacher collaboration?

THE SPECIAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

meets the individual needs of students ages three through twenty-one who are eligible for special education and related services according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

The department assists in the assessment process for determining special education eligibility.

A full continuum of services is available, ranging from the least restrictive to more restrictive environments, depending on the specific needs of the student. The department also supports schools in ensuring students with disabilities appropriately access the Common Core Standards and provides specialized instruction as determined necessary by the individualized education plan (IEP).

In collaboration with students, schools, families, and the community, the Department of Special Education assists students with disabilities in increasing academic performance and enhancing postsecondary options.

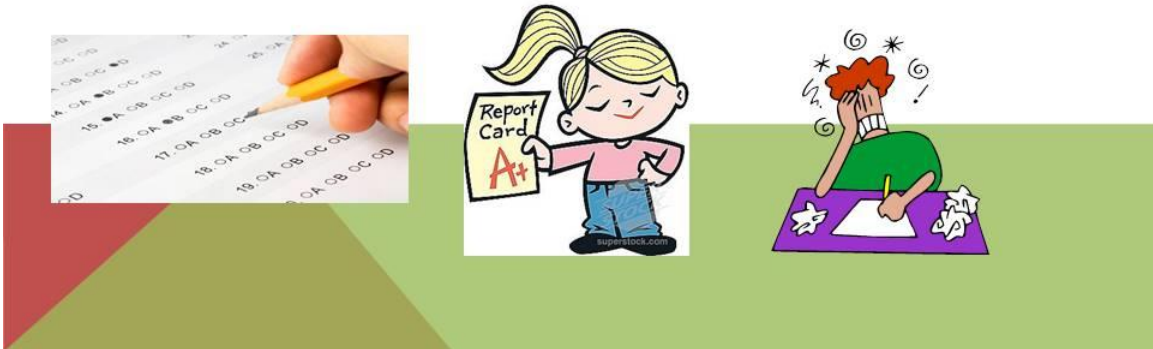# WHY IS EFFECTIVE TEACHER COLLABORATION SO ESSENTIAL?

In a study encompassing eight different school districts in Michigan and Indiana, Jones, Youngs, and Frank (2013) compared how accessible general and special education teachers' were to their local school colleagues. They discovered that a crucial phase of the new teachers' experience was how much support they received from their colleagues. This support was essential for maintaining and retaining new teachers within their local school system. The results indicated that a gap exists in how administration puts forth effort in ensuring that general and special education teachers build positive communal relationships (Jones et al., 2013).

The General and Special education teacher often collaborate to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners

An effective relationship is often thought of as a marriage in the classroom...let us have a discussion about the various co-teaching models

DeKalb County Schools has several preferred co-teaching models for assisting diverse learners.....

Alternative Teaching
One teacher supports a large group of students while the other teacher assists with remediation of a smaller group

Parallel Teaching:
Both teachers are teaching the same lesson at the same time to two separate groups of students

Station Teaching:
Students are often rotating throughout the classroom to various ability groups while both teachers are facilitating the activity
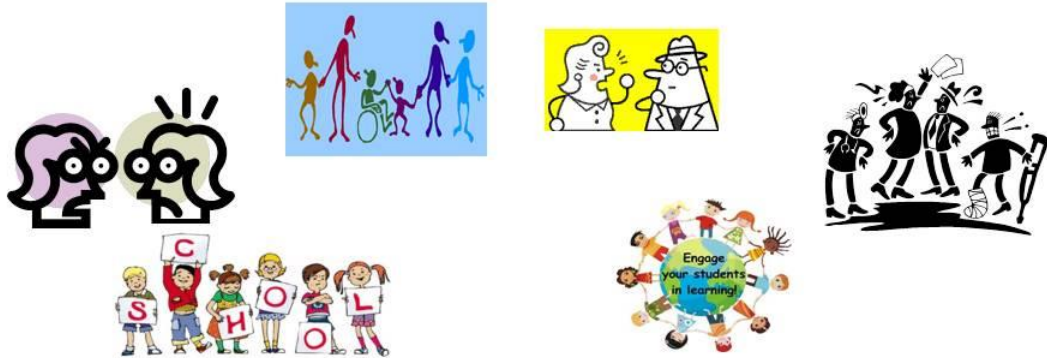
HERE IS A LOOK AT WHAT THE MODELS LOOK LIKE IN ACTION.....

INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT SPECIALISTS WILL ASSIST IN DEMONSTRATING THE VARIOUS MODELS TEACHERS PLAY THE ROLE OF STUDENTS

Here is an example of how things should not look ......
(Facilitator and Instructional Support Specialists)

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US?

One of the most prevalent approaches within the field of education today to assist in meeting the needs of a diverse group of learners is co-teaching (Tzivinikou, 2015a).

MORE RESEARCH

Every student with a disability has the right to specially designed instruction to meet their individual needs for mastering standards and skills within the general education classroom (Friend, 2015).

Dermirdag (2012) emphasized that special education and general education teachers should know as much as possible about each other's discipline in order to achieve maximum results in the collaborative setting.

REMEMBER THERE IS NO "I" IN "TEAM"

The main purpose for effective Teacher collaboration is to ensure the overall suc
of students based upon their individual needs and concerns.

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Every student with a disability has the right to specially designed instruction to meet their individual needs for mastering standards and skills within the general education classroom (Friend, 2015).

Jones, N. D., Youngs, P., & Frank, K. A. (2013). The role of school-based colleagues in shaping the commitment of novice special and general education teachers. *Exceptional Children, 79*, 365-383. Retrieved from EBSCOhost database. (Accession No. 85685757)

One of the most prevalent approaches within the field of education today to assist in meeting the needs of a diverse group of learners is co-teaching (Tzivinikou, 2015).

Appendix B: Initial 45 Minute Interview Question Guide

The protocol for conducting the interviews:

- Inform the participants of the purpose and use for conducting the interview.

- Assure the participants that all information discussed during the interview will be kept confidential.

- Inform participants that the interview will be audio recorded.

Interview Questions (General and Special education teachers)

RQ1: What are the general education teachers' perceptions and attitudes about working collaboratively with special education teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners?

RQ2: What are the special education teachers' perceptions and attitudes about working collaboratively with general education teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners?

1. **Primary:** How long have you been a collaborative teacher? **Follow- up:** What was your very first experience like? **Probe:** Tell me more about that.

2. **Primary:** Explain the selection process for you becoming a collaborative teacher **Follow- up:** What would you do different to enhance the process? **Probe:** Please elaborate on that.

3. **Primary:** What are your perceptions/attitudes about being a collaborative teacher? **Follow- up:** Why do you believe that you have developed those perceptions? **Probe:** Explain what you mean by that.

4. **Primary:** What training have you received since becoming a collaborative teacher? **Follow- up:** What other training do you feel may have been helpful? **Probe:** How does that make you feel?

5. **Primary:** Describe how effective you believe you are as a collaborative teacher? **Follow- up:** Please provide me with one more attribute. **Probe:** Tell me more about that last part.

6. **Primary:** Describe your relationship with current or past collaborative teacher/s. **Follow -up:** How have you grown from your experience with that teacher? **Probe:** Go into a little more detail about that please.

7. **Primary:** What role do you believe administration should play in building effective collaborative teams or relationships? **Follow- up:** What is the reasoning behind your response? **Probe:** Please elaborate a little more on that.

8. **Primary:** What has been good about your relationship with your co-teacher? **Follow -up:** Why do you believe those things have been that way? **Probe:** What makes you say that?

9. **Primary:** What has been lacking in your relationship with your co-teacher? **Follow- up:** What could have been done differently? **Probe:** Tell me more about that.

10. **Primary:** What would you like to happen to strengthen or improve your relationship with your co-teacher? **Follow -up:** What needs to take place for this to happen? **Probe:** Please provide a little more detail about that.

RQ3: How do general and special education teachers describe the optimum conditions under which instructional collaboration can occur?

11. **Primary:** What supports do you believe you need to be the most effective collaborative teacher? **Follow-up:** How could you go about making that happen? **Probe:** Please provide me more details about that.

12. **Primary:** What suggestions would you give to future collaborative teachers? **Follow-up:** Which suggestion do you believe should take place first? **Probe:** Tell me more about why you said that.

13. **Primary:** Describe the optimal conditions under which you believe instructional collaboration can occur to assist the needs of a diverse group of learners. **Follow-up:** What else can you add to that? **Probe:** Give me more details about that.

Appendix C: Follow-up Interview Questions

The Protocol for Conducting the Interviews:

- **Inform the participants of the purpose and use for conducting the interview.**

- **Assure the participants that all information discussed during the interview will be kept confidential.**

- **Inform participants that the interview will be audio recorded.**

30 Minute Follow-up Interview Questions

RQ3: How do general and special education teachers describe the optimum conditions under which instructional collaboration can occur?

1. **Primary:** Discuss what you know about the various coteaching models. **Follow-up:** Explain why you like one model versus another. **Probe:** Give me an example/s of when you used that particular model.

2. **Primary:** Which coteaching model is used the most when you are instructing with your co-teacher? **Follow-up:** Why do you believe this model is so widely used? **Probe:** What are some other examples of this?

3. **Primary:** What role do you believe teacher perceptions and attitudes play in the collaborative setting when it comes to the delivery of the Common Core standards

Initiative? **Follow- up:** Why do you believe this to be true?   **Probe:** Please

elaborate further on that point.

4. **Primary:** Describe a time when you observed a coteaching scenario. **Follow-up:** What were some of things that you may have adapted for your own coteaching environment? **Probe:** Why do believe you selected that?

5. **Primary:** Please explain how lesson plans are developed for the collaborative classroom. **Follow-up:** Why do you believe it is done in this manner? **Probe:** What additional feedback can you provide regarding this matter?