A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING:

UNDERSTANDING THE PERCEPTIONS, VALUES, AND EXPERIENCES OF FRESHMEN

LANGUAGE ARTS STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND ONE ADMINISTRATOR

by

Sheryl Elaine Ackers

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain a better understanding of collaborative learning through the perceptions of freshmen Language Arts students, teachers, and one administrator. Nine freshmen Language Arts students, four freshman Language Arts teachers, and one administrator participated in the study at Falcons Rise Up (pseudonym) (FRU). FRU is located approximately 45 minutes outside of Atlanta, Georgia. Theories from both Vygotsky (1978) and Bandura (1986) framed the study. Data methods included student, teacher, and administrator semi-structured interviews. Interview questions focused on participants' perceptions of and experiences with collaborative learning models. Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological reduction method of data analysis was utilized to arrive at the essence of participants' experiences. Participants' experiences were transcribed, organized, memoed, and coded in the analysis process. Data were analyzed for themes oriented toward the essence of participants' experiences with collaboration. The following themes were identified and contributed to the understanding of the research study: (a) benefits, (b) challenges, (c) expectations, and (d) role of administrators in providing personalized professional development for teachers. Data results revealed that schools need to utilize effective collaborative learning models to improve teacher effect on student performance and to support the development and implementation of personalized professional learning sessions that promote teachers' effectiveness in the classroom. The study was limited to a small school where only one grade level and subject were explored. Future research should be conducted in larger schools with more diverse demographic populations, amongst different content areas and grade levels.

*Keywords***:** collaborative learning models, freshman, academic success, Language Arts, perceptions, experiences, professional learning communities, interviews, mentoring

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"In all thy ways acknowledge him and he shall direct thy path" –Proverbs 3:6

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English Language Learners (ELL)

Falcons Rise Up (FRU)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA)

Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Professional Learning Communities (PLC's)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2002) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) (2004) reiterated the need for schools to offer differentiated pedagogy that addresses the needs of diverse learners in the general education curriculum, thus narrowing the achievement gap. However, the earliest formal efforts to connect the preparation of special education teachers with general education classrooms originated in 1975. In 1975 the federal government funded the Regular Education Pre-service Grants Program, also known as the Deans' Grants (Pugach, Blanton, & Correa, 2011). Such mandates carried great significance since the majority of special education students were being served in the general education setting (Van Garderen, Stormant, & Goel, 2012). Nonetheless, based on the intentions of inclusion practices, the number of special education students being served in the general education setting reflects a number that will continue to rise.

Increases in student diversity (disabilities and backgrounds) has emphasized the importance of regular education and special education teachers working collaboratively to plan and develop appropriate coursework to heighten learning outcomes and student success. Brownell, Griffin, Leko, and Stephens (2011) found that the knowledge and skills required for professional collaboration are important dimensions of inclusive-teacher effectiveness. According to Cahill and Mitra (2008), collaborating helps to provide teachers, support teams, and personnel with opportunities to build on existing knowledge of best practices and to incorporate developmentally appropriate approaches to improve the quality of instruction for all students. Failure to offer instruction that meets the needs of students "can significantly constrain the educational achievement of all youth served in such [educational] settings and

may limit the attainment of some of the most promising students" (Chance & Segura, 2009, p. 1). Carter, Prater, Jackson, and Marchant (2009) suggested that all teachers be trained on how to adapt classroom instruction to incorporate research-based strategies, in addition to collaborating consistently in order to plan supports and provide instructional adaptations and accommodations that meet the needs of students with disabilities.

The purpose of Chapter One is to explore the historical background of collaborative learning and its relationship to student achievement and teacher professional learning programs, which are inclusive of two educational reform initiatives. The current research study focused on understanding freshmen teachers, students, and one administrator's experiences with and perceptions of collaborative learning activities in order to identify effective strategies that meet the academic learning needs of the current generation of diverse student learners, as well as to identify professional learning opportunities that build the effectiveness and capacity of teachers. Chapter One provides the reader with the background information leading up to the study, situation to the researcher, problem statement, purpose statement, guiding research questions, significance of the study, and the outline of the research design.

Background

Reforming pedagogical practices involves new ideas, proposals, and research on best classroom practices in an attempt to increase student learning and achievement—reformed pedagogical practices are often integrated in school curriculums and teacher education programs. Nevin, Thousand, and Villa (2009) suggested that a reform of teacher preparation programs was needed to expand teachers' mastery of the education discipline, increase teachers' capacity to improve learning outcomes for students, and provide viable models for effective collaboration. Graziano and Navarrete (2012) suggested that "educational reform that leads to

an increase in K-12 student achievement starts with effective teacher preparation programs that include curricula for addressing the learning, language, and social needs of a diverse student population" (p. 110). Policy makers and decision makers have focused more attention on teacher preparation programs in order to enhance effective collaboration models. As a result, teacher preparation programs and professional learning models need to encompass elements of collaboration.

Moolenaar, Sleegers, and Daly (2012) found that well-connected teacher networks were associated with strong teacher collective efficacy, which in turn supported increased student achievement. Carter et al. (2009) denoted the value in structuring and supporting collaborative processes, and suggested that when teachers use specific models and procedures to guide collaborative planning processes, students can improve academic performance and social functioning. Merink, Meijer, Verloop, and Bergen (2009) stated, "Teachers who feel supported in their professional development may be more inclined to look for opportunities and situations which are helpful in their own development than teachers who do not feel supported" (p. 100). Collaborative learning models "foster and nourish a variety of skills, including motivation and self-regulation, which ultimately serves students well when they enter the workforce and seek leadership positions" (Paulsen, 2008, p. 315). These researchers pointed out that by supporting both teachers and students through collaborative learning models, both students and teachers can improve their performance by way of enhanced skills.

A reform of traditional teacher-led learning models, which often present the student as a customer—teachers provide a service to the students, and students are mere recipients of academic instruction, must take place in general education settings. Models such as these are not as effective in meeting the needs of diverse learners and offer little differentiation of

instruction (Watson, Boudreau, York, Greiner, & Wynn, 2008). Whitaker (2011) explained the retention rate for traditional teacher-led learning exchanges was more limited; therefore, reforming educational pedagogical practices to make use of collaborative instruction served as an effective approach to incurring student gains and progress during learning, because the use of collaborative instruction promotes students as knowledge consumers and knowledge producers. Whitaker continued, "If roles are transformed such that faculty and students are creators, distributors, and recipients of knowledge…students learn to interact and the flow of learning can be two-way," forever changing the dynamics of the classroom (p. 78). Evidence presented from the above researchers suggests that students' exposure to strong, supported collaborative learning models can increase achievement, retention rates, graduation rates, and test scores, all important strides towards fulfilling the requirements of NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004).

Previously, NCLB (2002) focused on rote memorization, standardized testing, and limited collaboration during teaching and learning (Roekel, 2014). By itself, NCLB did not meet the diverse needs of student learners and more educational reform attempts became necessary (Patrick, 2013). Patrick (2013) stated:

In the field of public education, No Child Left Behind aimed to promote the development of accountability models that would enhance educational outcomes. However, jaded federal proficiency expectations, fear of public ridicule, potential sanctions, and funding issues caused some states to water down performance provisions. More specifically, an analysis of states' NCLB content revealed that states developed lenient performance targets, decreased the probability that citizens would effectively utilize performance data by establishing fall report card release dates, required concerned citizens to seek out data,

and provided safe harbors that allowed underperforming schools to avoid sanctions (p. 235).

Currently, the implications of the NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004) mandates combined with the most recent efforts of nationwide Common Core State Curriculum Standards (CCSS) attempts to offer schools the necessary standards to correct many of the inequalities currently present in the educational system (Roekel, 2014). Particularly, the CCSS promises to provide equal educational access to high standards for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status, geographical location, or learning status. According to Roekel (2014), educators' hope lies in policymakers making "an equal commitment to implement the standards correctly by providing students, educators, and schools with the time, supports, and resources that are absolutely crucial in order to make changes of this magnitude to our education system" (p. 1).

The use of collaboration assists with educational reform. Educators need to collaborate with each other to develop curriculum aligned with the standards, field-test standards to gauge what works and what needs adjustments, and acquire updated, revised, and aligned textbooks and materials (Roekel, 2014). In order for the current reforms to produce effective results, stakeholders must be at the center of the efforts to develop aligned curriculum, assessments, and professional development relevant to schools, students, and local communities (Roekel, 2014). Ultimately, all of these plans must develop through collaborative efforts.

General and special education teachers need professional training in collaboration techniques to allow for a collaborative community that can develop and meet accountability standards for students, design professional development plans, and address multicultural issues (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2008). Reforming traditional teacher-led classroom practices to meet the needs of diverse student populations, especially for students with

disabilities, can occur through the use of collaborative instruction. Carter et al. (2009) stated, "Collaboration is a critical aspect of effective inclusion. When schools adopt specific procedures or models for collaboration, students with disabilities benefit from teachers' collaborative planning" (p. 61). However, Brownell et al. (2012) expressed a concern with collaboration. Brownell et al. stated, "Currently, researchers have not articulated the dimensions of effective collaborative teaching for students with disabilities; instead, they are assumed in scholarly writings about collaborative teacher education" (p. 237). In order to ensure that collaborative learning models are being implemented and utilized successfully for all student learners, clear guidelines and expectations must be communicated clearly. One solution involves general education teachers working more closely with special education teachers.

Collaborative instruction focuses on creating meaningful learning experiences by using clear, defined roles and ongoing communication. Van Garderen et al. (2012) called attention to Idol, Nevin, and Paolucci-Whitcomb's (2000) definition of collaboration as an "interactive process that enables people with diverse expertise to generate creative solutions to mutually defined problems" (p. 483). Carter et al. (2009) presented Friend and Cook's (2006) definition of collaboration in education as "co-equal professionals' voluntarily co-planning to achieve common goals" (p. 60). Bedwell et al. (2012) determined collaboration to be "a higher-level process that encompasses many frequently studied constructs such as, cooperation, teamwork, and coordination" (p. 142). Paulsen (2008) noted that collaboration "is perhaps best described as an interactive process involving individuals with varying levels of expertise who work together to solve a mutually-defined problem" (p. 313). Collectively, collaboration requires both teachers and students to work together in a way that empowers individuals to use their talents, skills, and experiences to solve problems and think critically.

The aforementioned literature presents evidence for schools to investigate how to strengthen the use of collaborative learning models at Falcons Rise Up (pseudonym) (FRU). FRU is a suburban high school centered outside of a major central Georgia city. For FRU, meeting the needs of diverse learners, while elevating student learning, achievement, and success, now centers on successful implementation of the collaborative learning model. More than ever, teachers are encouraged to intervene and take proactive measures, rather than reactive measures, in an effort to maintain and continue a focus on teaching and learning and to promote critical thinkers and doers. Yamaji (2016) wrote, "Classes in which students think actively and build knowledge, rather than classes in which students are passive, are desired, and accordingly, classes in which students learn collaboratively are required" (p. 256). Many veteran teachers at this high school are overwhelmed and intimidated by the idea of using collaborative learning models. Despite these challenges, Giles et al. (2010) found that schools cannot improve teaching practices if teachers are not willing to research and reflect on the influences that promote change. Van Garderen et al. (2012) further discussed the unclear impact collaboration has had on students with disabilities and the need for this impact to be examined. Since a profound amount of energy and emphasis has been placed on the use of the collaborative learning model at FRU, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of the perceptions, values, and experiences of general and special education students and teachers in order to eradicate barriers that could inhibit its sustainability and effectiveness.

Currently, studies do not exist that fully explore and understand the perceptions and experiences of freshman Language Arts students and teachers at a suburban school in a major central Georgia city in connection to collaborative learning as a means of designing professional development sessions and mentoring programs that move a school towards an effective

collaborative learning model. Instead of singularly relying on previously researched approaches that discuss meeting the diverse needs of students and teachers, it was important to understand how teachers and students at the research site viewed collaboration, teachers' and students' past experiences with collaboration, and teachers' and students' visions of collaboration in order to make this study more relevant and worthy of their time and energy (Van Garderen et al., 2012). Vygotsky's Social Constructivism Theory (1978) and Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986) provided the theoretical framework and supported the effective implementation of collaborative learning models for the current research study. The theoretical frameworks of the two theorists focus on how learning occurs through an individual's social interactions and cultural environments. The current research study sought to understand how learning occurs between teachers and between teachers and students. Further, Cabrera (2010) stated that a cultural shift must be present to create a cohesive school community that works together and builds collaborative efforts to improve school climate and create an academic focus of improving student achievement.

Situation to Self

The motivation behind the current study stems from my first three years of experience as a classroom Language Arts teacher without a strong support system or mentoring program that would have allowed me and other teachers to reflect on strong and weak practices, hone professional skills, and generate ideas from veteran teachers. During the novice years of my teaching career, I witnessed far too many teachers limit their teaching to only doing what veteran teachers insisted was the "tried and true." The message was that seasoned teachers understood the classroom, students, and the art of teachers. Therefore, novice teachers feared speaking up, sharing ideas, and initiating change in the department and the classroom. More and more,

teachers taught in isolation and hoped that their teaching produced favorable student achievement results and measured up to the expectations of the leaders in the school.

Based on what I experienced, the absence of a supportive mentoring program made the profession more exhausting and discouraging for many new teachers. For some teachers, planning lessons (for three or more preps), managing the day-to-day responsibilities of the classroom and the school, and teaching independent of colleagues can decrease teachers' confidence in their teaching abilities and stifle teachers' ability to take on leadership roles within the school. My experiences as a classroom teacher place me in a familiar category very connected to the subjects of my research. Although I have connections to the teacher participants' experiences, I will utilize Husserl's *epoche* (or bracketing), in which I will set aside my perspectives and "experiences, as much as possible, in order to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). Thus, the lens through which the work is viewed is largely ontological, reporting the varied perspectives in theme-form of the participants' perceptions and experiences with collaborative learning models. Further, the paradigm guiding the study was constructivist, wherein I sought to understand the participants' perceptions as seen through their experiences.

Despite having a positive college preparatory experience as a secondary English Language Arts education major, venturing into the professional realm as a certified educator highlighted the lack of meaningful professional development opportunities within the school setting. More professional development needed to occur that reflected the current challenges and expectations of the teaching realm. Shortly thereafter, I recognized the power in having a strong support system where collaboration serves as the driving force, and in creating a community where teachers can share ideas and reflect, improve educational practices, and increase teacher

effectiveness. Professional learning communities encourage the way teachers motivate students and impact students' ability to learn and be successful, as well as increase students' learning and academic success.

<div align="center">**Problem Statement**</div>

The current transcendental phenomenological research study proposes to study the problem of why deficits in skills, confidence, knowledge, and experience are factors that prohibit teachers from effectively meeting the needs of diverse student learners. Brownell et al. (2011) indicated how the expertise general education and special education teachers bring together in inclusive settings continue to be defined, especially for beginning teachers. Exploring the knowledge bases of special education and general education teachers can illuminate what needs to be addressed in teacher education programs (Brownell et al., 2012). Therefore, understanding more clearly the perceptions and experiences with collaborative learning of both teachers and students allows the researcher to identify barriers that inhibit the progress of collaborative learning.

Christopher and Barber (2009) suggested that student perceptions of supportive learning environments positively impact student engagement and achievement; these findings further suggest that learning was not an isolated experience and must take into consideration the role of personal interactions and the perceptions that stem from those interactions. As with any initiative, teachers must feel supported and validated before they can decide to take ownership of a plan and move forward with it (Giles et al., 2010). Furthermore, Damore and Murray (2008) argued that teachers' perceptions about what was needed to ensure effective collaborative teaching practices suggest that it was important to provide teachers, specifically in urban

settings, with opportunities to learn about collaborative practices and to provide educators with supports to implement this practice within schools.

Given the growing popularity of collaborative teaching practices as a service delivery model, it was important to continue to examine both the effectiveness of these practices and the underlying processes that can enhance the delivery of these models in urban schools. The motivation for conducting research emerged from my own epistemological beliefs and assumptions regarding collaborative instruction for students and teachers within the Language Arts classroom. In this case, the implementation of professional learning communities with guidance provides teachers with the support and validation they need to improve their educational practices and meet the needs of student learners. Professional learning communities allow teachers to reflect, share ideas and values, and "create a synergy in which both individuals and groups grow more accomplished," (Strahan, Geitner, & Lodico, 2010, p. 521). Moolenaar et al. (2012) shared that teacher networks expand teachers' skill sets and increase confidence in such a way wherein teachers collectively promote student learning and improve student achievement.

The field of education consists of highly diverse student learners who encompass a variety of learning styles, cultures, and backgrounds. The accountability of schools continues to hold significance as measured by student achievement and performance on local, state, and national assessments. Schools need to reform the instructional practices of teachers in order to increase the academic success of all students, despite students' diverse learning needs. Likewise, some collaborative learning practices have the potential to improve the academic performance of students. When schools identify the barriers that inhibit the progress of collaborative learning models in the classroom, more effective and relevant professional learning opportunities can be

developed. My study is significant for understanding the lived experiences of freshman Language Arts participants with collaborative instruction and bridging the gap between student achievement and the implementation of effective collaborative instructional models into the classroom.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experiences and perceptions of freshmen Language Arts students, teachers, and one administrator with collaborative learning models at a suburban public high school, Falcons Rise Up (pseudonym) (FRU), outside of a major city in central Georgia. In the current study, collaboration will generally be defined as employing interactive opportunities for two or more individuals with varying degrees of intelligence, experience, and values who work together to find solutions to a defined problem (Paulsen, 2008).

The two theories that guided this study are Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivism Theory and Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory. Both theoretical frameworks explain the processes through which learning occurs in connection to an individual's social and cultural environments. Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivism Theory focuses on the power gained through peer interactions and then explains how these interactions promote learning. Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory focuses on how individuals learn from personal interactions or the observed actions of others. The two guiding theories supported my research study since collaborative instructional models require students to socialize with peers and be influenced by environmental surroundings.

High failure and truancy rates, discipline problems, and limited success rates are prevalent across ninth graders in many states (Habeeb, Moore, & Seibert, 2008). Therefore,

ninth grade serves as an incredible opportunity for exploration for both the school and student.

Habeeb, Moore, and Seibert (2008) wrote, "If a school trains its ninth graders in the ways of

success, then in four short years the entire atmosphere of the school can be positively altered" (p.

3).

While collaboration has the potential to be interpreted in different ways depending on the

contextual discipline presented, baseline definitions support its use. A study conducted by

Bedwell et al. (2012) called attention to how "the lack of a descriptive, precise, and unifying

definition of collaboration has led to unfortunate construct contamination as well as deficiency;"

this type of deficiency poses a barrier to advances in research and practice. Further, Bedwell et

al. denoted the importance of improving the design of collaboration models since the utilization

of collaboration continues to increase and rise. "Therefore it is necessary to gain a thorough

understanding of what collaboration is and what it is not in order to help practitioners maximize

its effectiveness and usefulness" (Bedwell et al., 2012, p. 142).

One definition of collaboration came from Van Garderen et al. (2012), who used Idol,

Nevin, and Paolucci-Whitcomb's (2000) definition of collaboration to coin another. Van

Garderen et al. defined collaboration as "an interactive process that enables people with diverse

expertise to generate creative solutions to mutually defined problems" (p. 483). Carter et al.

(2009) defined collaboration as "co-equal professionals' voluntarily co-planning to achieve

common goals" (p. 60). Meanwhile, Bedwell et al. (2012) determined collaboration to be "a

higher-level process that encompasses many frequently studied constructs such as, cooperation,

teamwork, and coordination" (p. 142).

For my research study, Paulsen's (2008) definition of collaborative learning held the

most significance and appropriateness. Collaboration will generally be defined as employing

interactive opportunities for two or more individuals with varying degrees of intelligence, experience, and values who work together to find solutions to a defined problem.

Significance of Study

The contents of my study provide an understanding of the phenomenon, with emphasis on the need for schools to differentiate instruction and restructure educational practices in order to meet the academic learning needs of the new generation of increasingly diverse student learners. Nazareno (2014) wrote, "We can't afford to prepare students for a world that no longer exists. We must shift away from schools in which teachers are factory workers whose roles is to efficiently assemble uniform 'products'"(p. 24). Nazareno (2014) continued by saying that schools must prepare students as knowledge workers who will succeed in tomorrow's economy. "Collaboration, according to Rubin (2009), is a 'means of aligning people's actions to get something done"' (As cited by Morel, 2014, p. 36). Morel (2014) shared, "Collaboration leverages diverse perspectives and skills and can promote creativity and productivity" (p. 36). Yamaji (2016) discussed instructional lessons being designed to facilitate all students' participation and to avoid students potentially being deprived of a sense of belonging and involvement. Morel (2014) further stated:

> If educators expect students to excel in twenty-first-century skills, then teachers must model these skills. Students notice and emulate teachers' use of technology, collaborative practices with colleagues, and development of problem-finding and problem-solving skills. When teachers fail to model collaboration and the other competencies that support higher level thinking and creativity, students may assume that a right answer exists to all problems and that taking an intellectual risk is inappropriate. Teachers who work

collaboratively contribute to an environment in which students can grow and learn their

own relationship skills. (p. 37)

The research study's significance to the educational field provides ways to refine teacher

mentoring programs and interventions, instructional practices, and organizational cultures in

order to eliminate unfavorable challenges and gaps in teacher preparedness, and to increase

teachers' confidence, motivation, and willingness to cooperate and collaborate with others.

Yamaji (2016) noted how an analysis of teachers' reflections, based on student performance

results, allows for a discussion of which instructional structures are suitable for students'

learning needs. Conderman and Johnston-Rodriguez (2009) suggested that since school reform

reflects a process, investing in these particular areas can lead to greater teacher efficacy and

effectiveness over time, thereby increasing student achievement and learning.

Investigations into what may influence student achievement and performance has gained

increasing importance as the educational climate of America is heavily focused on accountability

and reform (Firmender, Gavin, & McCoach, 2014). Firmender, Gavin, & McCoach (2014) also

called attention to the connection between the ongoing support teachers extend to students,

students' active engagement during the learning process, and the presence of positive

relationship building and increased student achievement. In order for teachers, administrators,

and schools to have a full understanding of how to develop and revise existing professional

learning programs and instructional practices, the voices of all stakeholders must be heard. In

this study, the stakeholders were teachers, students, and one administrator. Researchers Stes,

Coertjens, and Van Petegem (2013) said, "…it is remarkable that students are seldom involved in

studies on the impact of instructional development" (p.1105). Such an observation bears

significance since teachers' methods and instructional practices during classroom instruction

have the potential to influence student achievement (Firmender, Gavin, & McCoach, 2014). The "evidence of impact is needed" to determine what teachers actually learn from professional development sessions, as well as to guide the development of instructional practices and professional learning (Stes, Coertjens, & Van Petegem, 2013, p. 1105).

In order to improve teacher efficacy and effectiveness and increase student achievement, how teachers, students, and administrators view collaborative instruction must be investigated. By uncovering the needs both of students and teachers, other schools and districts may gain valuable insight into reforming their teacher and classroom practices.

<div align="center">**Research Questions**</div>

With the increasing push for teachers to create engaging lessons and activities that are more personalized in order to meet the needs of diverse student learners and thinkers, a need to more clearly understand how teachers, students, and an administrator view collaborative instruction based on personal experiences follows. With data to support students' perceptions, interventions and recommendations can be implemented with the hope of strengthening teacher effectiveness and promoting student success. My research questions student, teacher, and one administrator's perceptions regarding participants' experiences with the phenomenon of collaborative instruction. The following questions will guide this study:

1. What are freshman Language Arts students' perceptions of collaborative learning models used in teachers' instructional practices?

According to Safavi, Bakar, Tarmizi, and Alwi (2013), student feedback leads to improvement in instruction; however, research on changes in instructional practices as a result of the use of student feedback is missing from the literature. "The methods and instructional practices teachers use during instruction have the potential for influencing student achievement"

(Firmender, Gavin, & McCoach, 2014, p. 216). Researchers Stes, Coertjens, and Van Petegem (2013) suggested that seeking out student perceptions of a teacher's teaching can provide an indication of a teacher's actual classroom behavior, since what students perceive does not necessarily reflect what teachers define. "Involving students' perceptions is certainly worthwhile, since the way students perceive teaching affects student learning" (Stes, Coertjens, & Van Petegem, 2013, p.1105). In order to understand more clearly how teachers can support students' diverse learning needs, improve instructional practices, and design more effective professional learning sessions, freshman Languages Arts student learners' perceptions of and experiences with collaborative instruction must be understood.

2. What are freshman Language Arts teachers' perceptions of collaborative learning models used in instructional practices?

Firmender, Gavin, and McCoach (2014) suggested that research attempts to address a number of issues related to instructional practice such as how instructional practices are conceptualized, how teachers develop the use of practice, how teachers can engage students, and how the teachers' use of instructional practices influences student achievement. Yilmaz (2011) stated:

> Studies conducted on the basis of teachers' beliefs are important in determining the way teachers perceive and organize instruction. Findings of researchers of teachers' perceptions and beliefs have provided valuable insights into teaching and assessment practices because it has been shown that these perceptions and beliefs not only have a considerable impact on teachers' instructional practices and classroom behaviors but also relate to students' outcomes. (p. 91)

3. What values are tied to freshman Language Arts teachers' and freshman Language Arts students' experiences with collaborative learning?

"Beliefs have a tendency to influence practice, especially beliefs attributed to value. Value beliefs (or beliefs about the value of something) encompass the perceived importance of particular goals and choices" (Ottenbreit-Leftwich, Glazewski, Newby, & Ertmer, 2010, p. 1322). Both teachers and students make value judgments about whether an approach, tool, or idea provides relevance to their goals. The more valuable an idea, tool, or approach appears, the more likely teachers and students are to make use of it (Ottenbreit-Leftwich, Glazewski, Newby, & Ertmer, 2010). Collaboration has become increasingly necessary in today's complex, global society (Morel, 2014). The importance of understanding whether or not teachers and students find value in collaborative learning has heightened since "collaboration is a skill that is valued by employers as well as civic and social organizations" (Morel, 2014, p. 37). Therefore, teachers and students must practice using collaboration models effectively to develop the skills for a future society where students will be called upon to collaborate in an increasingly complex economy and world (Morel, 2014). If teachers and students do not recognize the value in collaboration, more efforts must be made in order to decrease teacher and student learning in isolation, develop better professional collaboration between teachers for the benefit of teachers and students, and inform more innovative and best instructional practices in the classroom.

4. What are the barriers that inhibit freshman Language Arts general education and special education teachers' ability to use collaborative learning models to meet the needs of diverse learners? How can these barriers be overcome?

A study by Sun, Penuel, Frank, Gallagher, and Youngs (2013) identified a need for better evidence regarding teacher learning processes and mechanisms which examine teachers'

practices and "understand more about how teachers can learn best in the local situations in which they are situated" (p. 344). "The key to achieving ambitious policy efforts for improving all students' learning is to develop all teachers' sustainable capacity to improve their instructional practices," to the extent that "teachers benefit from professional development programs through interacting with professional development participants" (Sun et al., 2013, p. 362). Efforts to uncover which barriers inhibit teachers' abilities to collaborate with other teachers and educational stakeholders effectively and develop relevant professional learning opportunities begin by exploring teachers' perceptions of and experiences with of collaborative learning.

Research Plan

My research was conducted at a convenient, suburban high school, Falcons Rise Up (pseudonym), approximately 45 minutes outside of Atlanta, Georgia. Data collection was guided by the parameters of a phenomenological study. Data collection for phenomenological research studies typically involves interviewing multiple individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, p. 79). Emphasis for the data collection method was on participants' description of the essence of their experiences. A purposeful, conveniently available sample of nine freshmen Language Arts students, two freshman Language Arts teachers, two special education collaborative Language Arts teachers, and one department administrator participated in the study (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative, phenomenological research design was used to gain a better understanding of collaborative learning by way of face-to-face, semi-structured interviews of freshman college preparatory Language Arts students, teachers, and one administrator. These interviews were each less than an hour long. Other research approaches were not applicable in this study since the objective was to understand the

unquantifiable phenomena of the perceptions and lived experiences of teachers and students'

regarding collaborative learning (Creswell, 2013).

I collected data for all participants, excluding the administrator, over a one-month period

through reflected individual semi-structured interviews. I conducted the administrator interview

11 months later. Specifically, semi-structured, face-to-face, open ended interviews were used to

understand one administrator's and the student and teacher participants' perceptions of

collaborative learning models. All interviews with teacher, student, and the administrator

participants were transcribed. I used the Social Constructivist framework, wherein "individuals

seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). In this

type of research, the goal is to rely on the participants' views of situation as much as possible

(Creswell, 2013). Data analysis for this research study consisted of organizing the data,

memoing, and coding, guided by Moustakas's (1994) modifications in order to arrive at the

essence of participants' experiences with collaborative instruction (Creswell, 2013).

Triangulation was accomplished when the researcher corroborated "evidence from different

sources to shed light on a theme or perspective" (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). After I analyzed the

data, codes and themes were documented as identified from the three different interview sources:

Teachers, students, and one administrator (Creswell, 2013).

Delimitations

Delimitations provided boundaries for my research study. The delimitations included a

purposeful decision to limit the sample size of the participants to only freshman college

preparatory Language Arts students enrolled in a collaborative class at one smaller, suburban

high school. The sample of students provided a very small representation of the student body at

FRU. The use of a high school in a convenient location that was accessible and familiar to me

provided another delimitation for the study. I only solicited first year freshman students for participation in this study. I made no attempt to select more mature or academically-advanced students for participation in this study; therefore, gifted and honors students were excluded. Gifted and honors students were excluded as curriculum and lessons for these special levels are altered significantly to reflect greater levels of differentiation, collaboration, and tiering, opposite of those lessons utilized in college preparatory classes.

A third delimitation reflects the time frame for the data collection, which was limited to the end of one semester. Expansive, truthful responses to the interviews may also be limited since freshman students were asked to respond orally. Student participants' social and academic maturity may have affected interview responses. Particularly, responses could differ if other age groups were to be investigated, in addition to other subject areas and placement levels of students.

Definitions

1. English Language Learners (ELL) - learners who share one characteristic: Speaking a primary language other than English (Case, 2015). The U.S. Department of Education (2016) defined ELLs as, "a national-origin-minority student who is limited-English-proficient. This term is often preferred over limited-English-proficient (LEP) as it highlights accomplishments rather than deficits." Case (2015) added onto the definition of ELL and stated, "The term itself—English language learner—foregrounds language even though it encompasses scores of native languages, cultures, socioeconomic levels, and educational backgrounds, not to mention a kaleidoscope of individual aspirations and life experiences" (p. 362).

2. Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) - "A law ensuring services to children with disabilities throughout the nation. IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities (U.S Department of Education, 2016).

3. Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) - Available for grades kindergarten to 12th, "the Iowa Tests meet most state's requirements for an annual, nationally normed standardized test and offers educators a diagnostic look at how their students are progressing in key academic areas…the Iowa tests allow educators to trace student achievement growth continuously" (Seton Testing Services, 2016).

4. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) - An act that worked "to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

5. Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) - Researchers Hord (1997), McLaughlin and Talbert (2001), Louis et al. (1996) and Leithwood and Louis (1998) defined PLC's as:

> A professional learning community consists of a group of professionals sharing common goals and purposes, constantly gaining new knowledge through interaction with one another, and aiming to improve practices. It is a cycle where learning is normally embedded into the daily work; teachers gain new knowledge, try it out in practice, and, from the experience, gain yet more knowledge. They do this in interaction with each other, by working collaboratively. This cycle is

strongly influenced by: structural factors, which can foster collaboration or hinder it; cultural factors, which are people's beliefs and values; and leadership style, which greatly affects both the culture within the school and the structure (As cited in Siguroardottir, 2010, p. 397).

6. Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) –According to Vygotsky, ZPD is defined as "functions that have not matured yet, but are in a process of maturing, that will mature tomorrow, that are currently in an embryonic state; these functions could be called the buds of development, the flowers of development, rather than the fruits of development, that is, what is only just maturing" (As cited in Bozhovich, 2009, p. 49).

Summary

Chapter One focused on understanding the necessity of understanding freshmen Language Arts teachers', students', and one administrator's perceptions of and experiences with collaborative learning models. Research has attempted to find ways in which to equip teachers with improved instructional strategies and practices necessary for helping the current generation of students reach their full academic success in the Language Arts classroom. Further implications from this study provide teachers and administrators with ways to create more personalized and effective professional learning opportunities. The problem presented in this study focused on why schools need to reform the instructional practices of teachers in order to increase the academic success of all students in spite of students' diverse learning needs. The problem and purpose of this study were also outlined and then supported by the four guiding research questions connected to both the literature and to Vygotsky's (1978) and Bandura's (1986) theoretical frameworks. The research questions that guided the research study focused on the perceptions of collaborative instructional experiences the teachers, students, and one

administrator stated were used in the Language Arts classroom. Delimitations were discussed

and important definitions commonly used throughout the study were presented.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two explores the theoretical framework of the study and discusses two primary theories supported throughout the research. Social Constructivism Theory served as the primary theory and Social Cognitive Theory served as the secondary theory. This chapter includes an overview of the current literature regarding collaborative learning, student learning, effective instructional practices, and teacher professional development. This chapter discusses collaborative learning and its relationship to students' learning and teacher instruction. The literature review also includes the impact and usefulness of schools using Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) for teachers to strengthen collaborative learning models.

Theoretical Framework

The two theoretical frameworks that guided this research study were based on the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Bandura (1986). "Bandura (1977) and Vygotsky (1978), have stressed that education is a kind of social practice and learning occurs through social interactions" (Turel, 2016, p.80). Using the theories of Vygotsky (1978) and Bandura (1986) in this research study provided a basis for understanding participants' experiences with collaborative learning models.

Social Constructivism Theory

The philosophical assumption (Creswell, 2013) provided a basis for the current research study. Specifically, Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivism Theory enhanced the validity of this phenomenological study and was used as a conceptual lens to explain collaborative learning.

Shabani, Khatib, and Ebadi (2010) revealed that Vygotsky focused on several different domains of development: human evolution (phylogenesis), development of human cultures (sociocultural history), individual development (ontogenesis), and development that occurs

during the course of a learning session, activity, or very rapid change in a psychological function (microgenesis). For the current research study, emphasis was placed on microgenesis since this domain focuses on learning and leaning activities. Vygotsky had a special interest in how a learner's mental and social activity was organized by way of culturally constructive artifacts. Vygotsky also focused on self-talk and the use of language. Vygotsky's Social Constructivism theory (1978) attempted to account for the processes through which learning and development took place—especially with regards to the development of higher order functions. According to Vygotsky (1962), development cannot be separated from its social and cultural context. Vygotsky believed that social interaction with cultural artifacts formed the most important part of a learner's psychological development (Shabani, Khatib, & Ebadi, 2010). Vygotsky (1978) further noted that individuals influence the environment surrounding others and that individuals are also influenced by the environment.

Most importantly, the link between development and education is manifested through Vygotsky's idea of the Zone of Proximal Development. Shabani, Khatib, and Ebadi (2010) stated that collaboration with peers or mentors had a direct effect on a learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) carried significance in Vygotsky's studies. More specifically, ZPD reflected "the distance between the actual development levels as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Shabani, Khatib, & Ebadi, 2010, p. 238). Essentially, ZPD described a learner's current or actual level of development and the next level attainable by way of environmental tools and peer interactions.

Shabani, Khatib, and Ebadi (2010) discussed the Zone of Proximal Development further and stated that when students and teachers collaborate with others, particularly those who are more skilled, learners are able to internalize new concepts, psychological tools, and skills. Engaging in collaboration that makes use of ZPD creates culturally meaningful learning and problem-solving tasks. Altogether, "the learner's zone of proximal development is assessed through interaction or collaboration with a learner because it provides an opportunity for imitation, which is the way for identifying maturing psychological functions that are still inadequate for independent performance" (Shabani, Khatib, & Ebadi, 2010, p. 239). Here, the constructivist approach of Social Development theory represented the quintessential core of collaborative learning. In a culture and environment where social skills are necessary, collaborative models require students and teachers to collaborate on instructional content to achieve optimal learning; with collaborative tasks, students' and teachers' engagement increases when they work with others.

Peer collaboration has been shown to be an effective technique for students of different levels (in primary and secondary schools, as well as in colleges and universities) and personalities across a wide-range of educational goals and content (Miller & Benz, 2008). According to Vygotsky (1978), people learn concepts and strategies during interactions with more-knowledgeable individuals and then internalize them, as evidenced in peer-directed collaboration for student learning; additionally, expressing and defending beliefs and opinions as well as questioning others' ideas helps learners to recognize, clarify, and repair inconsistencies in their own thinking (Webb et al., 2008). Participation in collaboration models benefits student learners.

Fully understanding the perceptions and experiences of collaborative learning creates opportunities for educators and administrators to locate and share recommendations to support the institution of change, as well as implement effective collaborative instructional professional learning communities and mentoring programs that benefit teachers and students. Ultimately, the goal for schools should be to prepare and empower students to function on higher levels. Moreover, this philosophical approach concentrates on the influence of culture on a setting, as well as how culture shapes an individual's interactions with others. The philosophical approach encourages individuals to work together, with learning being a social process where an individual can lend his/her intelligence to a task in order to problem solve. Rozenszayn and Assaraf (2011) found, "when discourse occurs between students in collaborative learning, it generates a meaning construction zone…reminiscent of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development" (p. 139). Interactions with others allow individuals to integrate shared ideas and to find new knowledge. Thus, the end goal focuses on both students' and teachers' ability to take experiences in collaborative learning environments while in the ZPD and use them later or apply the knowledge gained to other experiences and tasks.

Social Cognitive Theory

The second theory woven throughout the research on collaborative learning is Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive theory. Observational learning significantly consumed Bandura's research studies. The basic premise of Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive theory focuses on the idea that humans are motivated to engage in diverse activities that make use of information that stems from personal interactions or the observed actions of others (Michael & Nancy, 2006). Social Cognitive theory acknowledges that influences from the environment, people, and behavior all affect human functioning, which in the classroom hold implications for impacting

student learning and achievement (Michael & Nancy, 2006). Moreover, several factors such as context, culture, community, and learner characteristics—individual learning styles, self-efficacy, and motivation—influence teaching and learning in social learning perspectives (Hill, Song, & West, 2009).

Social Cognitive theory recognizes three distinct forms of agency: The environment predetermines action independent of cognitive influence (mechanical), thought, independent of environment, predetermines actions (autonomous), and human functioning as not predetermined by individual factors, but independent factors through triadic reciprocal causation (emergent interactive) (Michael & Nancy, 2006). The social learning perspective supports the idea that knowledge construction stems from individuals engaging in activities, receiving feedback, and participating in other forms of human interaction in public and social contexts (Hill, Song, & West, 2009). Particularly for students, social interactions—whether brief or long—are held between other students, instructors, and administrators. Equally important in Social Learning theory is the use of extensive modeling, a powerful tool in the learning process. Hill, Song, and West (2011) defined modeling as "a pattern or example that is provided to a student to illustrate how one might behave. The expectation is that observing the model will impact the student's perceptions and understandings about the subject" (p. 91). Learners who focus attention on the model are able to retain information, mimic the behaviors viewed, and initiate change.

Related Literature

The current chapter will present literature related to the reform, implementation, effectiveness, benefits, and challenges of collaborative learning models as a tool to improve the quality of students' education and learning experiences. The themes examined in the current

chapter outline research discussing the impact of implementing collaborative learning models into the classroom setting.

Need for Educational Reform

Due to recent reform initiatives such Georgia's Race to the Top (2012) and Common Core Standards (2012), in addition to the longstanding NCLB Act (2002) and IDEA (2004), primary and secondary education institutions have an increased responsibility to adapt new curriculum and improve teaching strategies for increased student learning in Language Arts. Overcoming academic and equity disparities requires serious revision to the definition and structure of school curriculum (Futrell, 2011). Reardon's (2013) observations supported those of Futrell (2011). Reardon warned:

> If we do not find ways to reduce the growing inequality in education outcomes, we are in danger of bequeathing our children in a society in which the American Dream—the promise that one can rise, through education and hard work to any position in society—is no longer a reality. (p. 15)

In order to overcome academic and equity disparities, schools must devote more attention to the organization structures, particularly the planning and delivery of academic instruction. Even though school-based strategies alone will not eliminate disparities among students as they acquire primary and secondary education, incorporating stimulating curriculum and instruction will help to reduce inequality in educational outcomes.

Moreover, the modern student population consists of highly unique traits that impact teaching and learning; as a result, differences between the teachers' and learners' generations must be recognized, analyzed, and addressed if faculty are to meet the needs of students (Black, 2010). Students' learning preferences have changed due to the increase in the mix of

nationalities and the diversity of learning needs, as well as the popularity of technological

advances. Some research has even suggested a physiological difference between the brains of

digital natives and those of adults from previous generations (Black, 2010). Ultimately, noting

changes in student development and learning provides educators with a more realistic picture of

their students. Teachers can then alter instructional practices to make them more effective and

extend students increased opportunities to be more academically successful.

     Modern society continues to change at an exponential pace due to an increasingly

complex, multicultural, multilingual, highly technological, global society. In the past, students

competed with other students across states, but today, students compete with students from other

parts of the world (Futrell, 2011). Such a pace requires educators to transform the education

system to ensure that future workers have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be successful

in a growing pool of workers, leaders, and citizens (Futrell, 2011). Regarding the workforce,

Wagner (2008) shared that people have to understand the importance of working fluidly and

across multiple boundaries. Therefore, organizations and corporations deem the ability to work

collaboratively as an essential skill, whereas the value of "command-and-control leadership

style" has diminished and is increasingly a relic of the past in corporations and organizations

(Wagner, 2008, p.). Both Futrell (2011) and Wagner agreed that students need to be prepared to

learn continuously, think critically, and adapt to a constantly changing environment so that they

can become productive citizens. The economic prosperity of the United States depends on the

ability of all its citizens to compete in the knowledge economy, which ultimately depends on

teachers and schools (Cochran-Smith & Power, 2010). Therefore, schools need transformative

leaders who understand the importance of faculty members working together to implement a

culture that values learning for all students (Futrell, 2011). These leaders will develop a culture that sets the tone for collaboration.

Academic reform must be designed to ensure that all high school students can be successful, regardless of their economic or social background (Brady, 2010). Conveying knowledge, directing learning and instruction, delivering answers, and focusing on teaching are characteristics of the old perspectives of educational pedagogy, whereas focusing on learning and facilitating problem solving, self-regulated learning, collaboration, and idea sharing represents a modern perspective on education (Chelliah & Clarke, 2011). Currently, schools are undergoing a profound shift in how they address students' academic challenges and are using a systems approach to promote student success (Lane, Menzies, Ennis, & Bezdek, 2013). Part of this shift includes the use of the collaborative learning model. Del Prete (1997) argued that the very best way to reform education happens by "changing entrenched expectations, belief systems, and structures as much as teaching and the allocation of resources" (p. 97). Continuing to find newer, more effective ways to teach students is central to improving students' academic learning.

Collaborative Instructional Models as a Solution for Academic Reform

While many different pedagogical formats can be used to help improve students' knowledge and understanding of content, a study conducted by Kolloffel, Eysink, and Jong (2011) concluded that collaborative learners outperform individual learners. In this study, data were measured using pre- and post-tests to determine students' learning outcomes, whereas students who participated in the collaborative learning setting obtained significantly higher post-test scores. "In [collaborative] inquiry learning, students plan and execute inquiry processes and select, process, analyze, interpret, organize, and integrate information into meaningful and

coherent knowledge structures" (Kolloffel, Eysink, & Jong, 2011, p. 241). In this study, collaborative learning was more effective than other learning models because it made use of and united two widely popular learning methods: inquiry learning and collaborative learning.

Taking on initiatives to structure a collaborative model within schools highly impacts the degree of success and learning for students and teachers. A case study of South Loop Elementary School in Chicago conducted by Baccellieri (2010) revealed that carefully designed structures, routines, expectations, and processes facilitate collaboration, especially since teachers are the core of collaborative change processes within schools (Lezotte & Synder, 2011). Lezotte and Snyder (2011) suggested that the most effective schools have a high degree of engagement and collaboration between teachers. Through collaboration, teachers form a shared understanding and commitment to instructional goals, priorities, and accountability.

Ongoing research continues to support the implementation of collaborative learning models for students and teachers. According to Lane et al. (2013), "many school districts are shifting away from reactive, wait-to-fail models and toward collaborative, coordinated systems of support" (p. 9). In particular, schools are encouraged to incorporate collaborative practices into district curriculums—for example, reviewing and reflecting on goals and planning in order to form a habit of inquiry when focused on observable or readily obtainable evidence of student learning (Brady, 2010). Classrooms need to become learning communities that value thinking and support every student during the learning process; in these communities, reflection and collaboration are necessary (Brady, 2010). Moore (2011) said, "Teamwork where individuals complement each other's' skills favors knowledge transfer and also allows for comparative advantage and specialization, thus improving productivity" (p.). Moore continued, "Thus, team diversity in the broadest sense could improve productivity via knowledge sharing and

coordination, especially if such diversity also entails complementary skills and knowledge" (p. 122). Allowing varied talents, skills, experiences, and cultures to merge helps teachers and students feel more confident about what they can contribute to the team's progress, especially when they do not have to feel insecure about any of their deficits or weaknesses, but can instead focus on bringing their strengths to the team.

Evidence to Support the Use of Collaboration

The increasing number of schools that have devoted research to understanding the fundamental importance and impact of collaborative learning activities provides evidence to support the use of collaboration. For example, a qualitative study conducted by Tolmie et al. (2010) investigated the impact of collaborative instruction in primary schools. Tolmie et al. questioned whether collaborative group work leads to improved classroom relations. Participants consisted of 575 students in ninth through twelfth grade from a sample of urban and rural schools in Scotland. For this study, teachers' perceptions and ratings of collaborative skills and activities and students' interactions were used for data collection, as well as a pre-test and post-test format. Within the schools in Scotland, this study found that students who participated in collaborative group work achieved social gains in understanding, therefore making the collaborative group activity approach doubly worth teachers' time and energy. Further data revealed that not only did students benefit from exposure to collaborative activities, but teachers did as well. Additionally, this study suggested the power of social dynamics in academic contexts is fundamentally important to group work skills. Noteworthy was the fact that positive perceptions of colleagues, improved work relations, and subsequent cooperation and relations all stemmed from successful management and implementation of collaborative activities.

Schools' Needs Determine the Structure of Collaboration

The presentation and function of collaborative models may vary based on a school's or district's needs. Freedom Elementary School in Santa Cruz, California, implemented a collaborative-pairing model, specifically designed to address fragmented working relationship problems between general and special education teachers (Carter et al., 2009). For this school, emphasis on developing effective collaboration between special education and general education teachers remained at the forefront. Though the focus of this research centered on reforming inclusion practices between general education and special education teachers in order to meet the needs of special education students more effectively, its implications can be applied to all teachers and students. This study continuously reiterated that communication of and about student learning, in conjunction with thorough instructional planning, is a necessary component of collaborative models. "Regardless of the collaborative structure being used, successful collaboration requires planning, time, effort, and administrative support" (Carter et al., 2009, p. 69). Teachers may lack the skills needed to collaborate or may not possess a clear understanding of what effective collaboration does or how to create collaborative frameworks. Not only do administrators need to provide the time, resources, and support teachers need to collaborate, but administrators also need to provide the direction and structure of collaboration models.

The Need for Students to Collaborate

Students should be encouraged to collaborate and actively participate in their learning, since collaborative learning has been shown to increase students' knowledge, quality of interactions, academic motivation, learning, and feelings of success (Selah, Lazonder, & Jong, 2007; Miller & Benz, 2008). Saab, van Joolingen, and van Hout-Wolters (2012) conducted a study that explored the conditions needed for efficient and effective learning compared to those

needed for task and team regulation. Saab et al. found that collaborative learning can positively affect the quality of the learning process and can lead to the construction of new knowledge, especially when educators merge collaborative learning with inquiry learning to support students' inquiry learning process and improve their learning performance. In this study, Saab et al. investigated how the support of collaborative inquiry learning environments can influence the use and success of tenth-grade students who worked in collaborative inquiry learning pairs during regulative activities. Saab et al. concluded that learning environments that require students to work together carry significance. Support of the learning process, communication, and the inquiry learning process all help students to coordinate and manage their collaborative inquiry learning processes.

International Use of Collaborative Instruction

Higgitt et al. (2008) focused on the role of international collaboration in the learning and teaching of geography in higher education. Higgitt et al. experimented with different forms of collaboration and factors that influenced the establishment, maintenance, and enhancement of international collaboration. This study aimed to uncover whether subject matter, content, process of collaboration, location of collaborators, or stakeholders involved influenced the success of collaboration. The primary focus on learner outcomes centered on the contribution of collaborative learning to cognitive, affective, and interpersonal skills, in addition to investigating whether it was possible for geographers to contribute new information on collaborative learning.

Benefits of Collaborative Instruction as an Effective Instructional Tool

Effective student learners are developed when a variety of collaborative strategies that help students listen, understand, record, and study new information are employed (Munk, Gordon, & Caldarella, 2010). An important component of pedagogy that meets the needs of

diverse learners is the use of collaborative learning models. Research from Carter et al. (2009) and Paulsen (2008) revealed that utilizing collaborative learning models promoted improved academic skills and continued professional and personal growth for educators and students, as well as an enhanced sense of community within the learning environment. Students who were encouraged to work with and help others, in addition to having to give back to their communities, developed attitudes and competent characteristics of healthy development and successful learning, such as social competence, problem solving, and a sense of self and future (Williams, 2003). McCann (2010) further asserted, "Collaborative teams tend to plan strategically, keeping specific target outcomes in mind and planning together a course of instruction that offers the strongest potential for students to attain goals" (p.111). Research from McCann (2010) has indicated that the goal for supporting students and encouraging them to take responsibility for their learning becomes easier when students are able to solve real problems and tasks that require them to work with others.

Collaborative learning opportunities allow individuals to explore increased complex thinking through their interactions with others and engagement in a common task (Ding & Harskamp, 2011). Ding and Harskamp (2011) examined the effectiveness of collaborative learning with peer tutoring in a secondary school's chemistry laboratory. Analyses of students' learning achievements showed that students in both the collaborative learning and peer tutoring situations outperformed those students who learned individually (Ding & Harskamp, 2011). Collaborative learning allows students to become a part of a synergetic whole, where they are supported and validated (Paulsen, 2008). This carries significance since the once high demand for independent workers has recently expanded to a high demand for collaborative workers,

whereas collaborative workers contribute personal knowledge, talents, and skills to another person or group in an effort to complete a given task.

Meaningful collaborative instruction can narrow the achievement gaps in schools, thus increasing and sustaining student achievement (Cabrera, 2010). Briggs (2007) discussed how ongoing curriculum renewal enhances the effectiveness of collaborative learning. Faculties must collectively assume responsibility for the curriculum, beginning with collaboration among teachers, departments, and teams.

Implementing Instruction into School Curriculum

In order for effective collaboration to occur within a learning community, collaborative culture must be introduced and guided by administrative teams, since many studies have identified principals as the central shapers of a school's culture (Supovitz, Sirinides, and May, 2010). Erasing the disparities that plague too many schools begins with strong leadership (Futrell, 2011); educators and administrators must work together within their communities to redefine and reinvent the educational system (Futrell, 2011). Agreeing with Futrell (2011), Supovitz, Sirinides, and May (2010) stated that "through fostering a climate of instructional collaboration, principals have the greatest impact on learning" (p. 46). Specifically, the effects of principal leadership and peer teacher influence on teachers' instructional practice and student learning relies heavily on administrators modeling the collaborative practice for teachers in order to build a culture of trust that will directly lead to the heart of a school's collaborative organization (Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). The impact of school leadership in connection to instructional improvement and teacher collaboration was demonstrated by peer influence with high levels of instructional conversation, interactions surrounding teaching and learning, and

participation in advice networks associated with increases in the amount of change in instruction and teacher reports.

Developing and enhancing collaboration requires "commitment to ongoing support of collaborative initiatives [and] is likely to be best sustained where there is a clear perception of value of the activity" (Higgit et al., 2008, p. 131). Higgit et al. (2008) continued, "In this regard thorough evaluation of the activity is important for both guiding the practitioners in adjusting the content and structure and for 'selling' the worthiness of the initiative" (p. 131). In the previous statements, Higget et al. (2008) explained the teacher's role in communicating to students the importance of collaborative initiative activities so that students can understand their roles and expectations more clearly, and therefore produce more meaningful work. Another point of consideration is that of teacher flexibility when utilizing collaborative learning initiatives. Though students are empowered in the collaborative learning process, during collaborative learning activities it remains important for teachers to monitor students' work production constantly and evaluate students' progress in order to make adjustments to learning activities as necessary.

Effective Implementation and Models of Collaborative Instruction

Rozenszayn and Assaraf (2011) conducted a case study of collaborative learning among high schools students. These researchers discussed effective collaboration beyond students working in groups, but instead as a matter of engaging in various learning processes during collaborative learning activities. When students work collaboratively they are given opportunities to encounter new perspectives, resolve differing perspectives through discussion, explain thinking about a phenomenon, provide and receive critiques, and observe strategies and listen to explanations from others (Rozenszayn & Assaraf, 2011). Rozenszayn and Assaraf

(2011) further noted that when students are able to share their findings and thoughts out loud with others, especially when they find meaning, perform knowledge construction, and understand complex natures of subject, they create an "inquiring community" (p. 139). Bell (2010) stated that finding a balance between freedom and guidance in a collaborative inquiry learning environment should give students options to develop their own questions. The ability to ask good questions is important to students' higher-level thinking skills. When student learners have the freedom to develop their own questions during their investigations while learning, their learning experiences are heightened.

Major Constructs of Collaborative Instruction

In this section, inquiry learning, active learning, and collaborative argumentation and discourse are discussed as three of the major constructs of collaborative instruction.

Inquiry learning. Students fully benefit from collaborative learning activities when collaboration is paired with inquiry learning. Research has indicated that inquiry learning is a leading active approach to learning in general, in which student learners are able to explore real problems, ask questions, engage in investigations, and construct new understanding (Gijlers & Jong, 2009). With the inquiry learning model, students are encouraged to be active agents in the process of knowledge construction at a greater capacity (Gijlers & Jong, 2009). As teachers progress and become more comfortable utilizing the collaborative learning process in their instruction, additional learning strategies beyond inquiry learning can be introduced to increase the impact on student learning and outcomes.

However, it is worthwhile for teachers to consider that despite its benefits, inquiry learning is often recognized as a difficult process for students to understand; when using this approach, teachers will need to provide some form of guidance for the majority of students

(Gijlers & Jong, 2009). Because of the difficulty involved with inquiry learning and students'

common inability to direct their own learning processes, inquiry learning often pairs well with

collaboration, especially since prior and current research has recognized collaboration as a means

to enhance student learning. Gijlers and Jong (2009) conducted research on how collaborative

knowledge construction within an inquiry learning university preparatory track environment

could be assisted with scaffolds that would support students' hypothesis generation process. In

general, the aim of the study was to evaluate the effects of different forms of support that

centered on students' inquiry learning processes and outcomes. This study found that

"collaboration with another student might be a natural form of support during inquiry learning.

In a collaborative setting, plans must be made explicit and students' reasoning, ideas, and

theories must be explained in a mutually understandable way" (Gijlers & Jong, 2009, p. 240).

The findings of this study suggest that collaboration activities that utilize inquiry learning can

encourage students to experiment and draw conclusions at a greater capacity.

Active learning. Another topic of discussion centers on active learning in connection to

collaboration. Active learning as a pedagogical approach to teach various subjects continues to

gain support, especially in the scientific field (Fate-Hartley, 2011). Value is added to active

learning when students can apply knowledge and engage in course material in a thoughtful

manner, which supports the idea that meaningful student engagement leads to gains in student

understanding of basic concepts (Fate-Hartley, 2011). Miller and Benz (2008) further discovered

that peer collaboration can be particularly valuable in promoting discussions that involve and

require diverse perspectives and advanced problem solving techniques that not all students

possess.

Collaborative argumentation and discourse. Collaborative argumentation and discourse are key to enhancing students' understanding of content material on deeper, more complex levels (Nussbaum, 2008). Essentially, shared group learning outcomes in collaboration work to strengthen the students' knowledge, skill, competence, and confidence so that he can ultimately produce individual learning outcomes. Afterwards, it is important for educators to recognize the residual effects on learning that come from group interactions (Nussbaum, 2008). Nussbaum (2008) further highlighted that critical, elaborative discourse takes collaboration a step further in that it requires participants to assume various roles, while generating different responses and arguments—such discourse bridges connections between students' existing knowledge to new ideas, ingenuity, and potential. Roles define students' function or responsibility within the learning group. Saleh, Lazonder, and Jong (2007) discussed the method of assigning students to specific roles as an unobtrusive way to regulate their participation in the learning discourse. Group roles are therefore a potentially powerful means to increase participation of students of all abilities.

Role of Teacher and Administrator in Creating a Culture of Collaborative Instruction

Along with administrators, teachers are also responsible for creating a collaborative culture. Tolmie et al. (2010) argued, "Successful collaboration amongst school children requires preparation for the management discussion, including acceptance of disagreement" (p. 179). Teachers need to be equipped with the knowledge, resources, and confidence to implement collaborative learning successfully into their classroom instruction. Macpherson (2010) indicated that collaborative effectiveness increases when teachers "respond to the lived experience and context of distinctive learners" (p. 13). Essentially, the phenomenon of teachers

connecting with students and their academic experiences creates a culture where students can feel more comfortable with their learning and empowered to take risks.

Starting off, support teams, primarily teachers and leaders, must identify the cultural norms, programs, and practices that will be used to close the achievement gap and sustain success. Cabrera's (2010) ideas have been promoted through practices for effective collaboration, the utilization of professional learning communities, the recognition of school culture, and the sharing of leadership. Further, research from Connolly and Jones (2007) denoted that even tenured faculty members' involvement in collaborative efforts at the individual, classroom, and professional level has worked to build stronger relationships with students and has helped promote egalitarianism. The evidence provided from Connolly and Jones's (2007) study proves useful since the goal of secondary teachers is to prepare students for college and/or the workforce, by meeting the mandates of educational standards and objectives.

Ultimately, teachers need to work together to increase student learning and success. Noll (2007) emphasized that teachers need to develop skills in creativity, collaborative teaming processes, co-teaching, and interpersonal communication that will promote the unity necessary to craft diversified learning opportunities for student learners. Swenson and Strough (2008) indicated that these skills should be apparent in teachers' approaches to grouping students for collaborative learning opportunities, since real world people will often be expected to collaborate with others of diverse backgrounds. Teachers need to find a balance in grouping students, taking into consideration personal and social preferences as well as heterogeneity that "stimulates both high and lower ability students and makes full use of the knowledge construction potential of group work" (Rozenszayn & Assaraf, 2011, p. 141).

Benefits of Collaboration for Teachers

As with students, when teachers share ideas and problem solve collectively, goal setting and reaching intensifies. Teachers benefit from collaboration used as a professional development tool. Teachers value professional development that provides a coherent connection between experiences and actual classroom practice, engagement in content-area learning, and communication with other teachers (Stanley, 2011). Horn and Little (2010) supported this notion and first called attention to the 25 years of research that demonstrated the significance of teachers' collegial relationships as a factor in school improvement. Particularly, a large-scale, longitudinal study of school reform in Chicago was conducted by Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, and Easton (2009) found that measures of professional community were differentiated consistently between improving and stagnating schools and were predictive of student outcomes in subjects such as reading and math (As cited in Horn and Little, 2010). English and mathematics courses were the primary subjects for this study. Horn and Little (2010) discovered that when teachers established structure in conversational routine practices within teacher professional communities, the function of the communities strengthened and therefore allowed teachers to forge, sustain, and support learning and improvement. Together, the sufficient frequency of teachers' interaction provided teachers with more learning opportunities, depth, and insights for fostering instructional innovation.

McCann (2010) stated, "While teachers who plan in relative isolation work conscientiously, they are less inclined to express in detail the kind of learning they want to result from their instruction" (p. 111). Levin and Marcus (2007) shared accounts from previous research on collaboration and teacher community as being, "'a fairly straightforward, well-established way to appreciably improve both teaching quality and levels of learning,'" which can

significantly impact achievement rates. The effect of teachers working together, particularly in professional learning communities, to unpack teaching is profound, and teachers who work with skilled colleagues to hone the depths of their expertise may be more confident and apt to sustain further learning and sharing (Stanley, 2011, p. 77). Teachers with more confidence and support are often more prepared to confront the challenges within their classrooms and are more apt to develop solutions for improving instructional practice and student learning success.

Collaboration as a Tool to Improve Teacher Quality and Effectiveness

Multiple stakeholders are committed to improving student outcomes and making a difference in student performance at the classroom level (Butler & Schnellert, 2012). Students' performance in the classroom is heavily tied to teachers' instructional performance. As a result of educational stakeholders' interest in student learners' academic performance and emerging trends in the current generation of student learners, school districts and schools are being asked to develop improvement plans that elevate teacher performance. With the need for teachers to improve instructional practice in order to meet the learning needs of students, teacher professional development as a means of fostering and/or enacting educational change holds increased significance.

The use of professional development models that incorporate collaboration initiatives allows for shifts in teacher practice, and improved teacher development and performance (Butler & Schnellert, 2012). Collaboration initiatives take professional development a step further than traditional workshops that work only to enhance skills (Butler & Schnellert, 2012). Butler and Schnellert (2012) expanded further by discussing why collaboration as a tool for teachers' professional development creates opportunities for teachers to draw on resources, and inform sustained inquiry and reflection-on-action. Musanti and Lucretia (2010) stated that "collaborative

practices have been defined as central to professional development because they further

opportunities for teachers to establish networks of relationships through which they may

reflectively share their practice, revisit beliefs on teaching and learning, and co-construct

knowledge" (p. 74). Therefore, emerging teacher professional development models that utilize

collaboration initiatives remain an appealing, viable option for teacher development, especially

in professional learning communities.

"Professional parity, mutual goals, shared responsibility, and shared accountability are

crucial characteristics of professional collaboration" (Munk, Gibb, & Caldarella, 2010, p. 178).

Stanley (2011) found that the most effective strategies for fostering long-term collaborative

learning occur through concrete, teacher-specific extended training, local classroom assistance,

teacher decision-making, and regular teacher meetings. In light of continued research

concerning teacher effectiveness, teacher learning has emerged at the forefront in connection to

closing the achievement gap. Specifically, when teachers' knowledge and skills are developed

collaboratively, new interventions and reforms work to achieve academic goals (Levine &

Marcus, 2007). In order to meet the needs of a changing generation of student learners, teachers

must refine and reform instructional practices to ensure that students are engaged learners.

A qualitative study conducted by Zhou (2011) examined the experiences of both

instructors and pre-service teachers and teacher experiences with collaboration in an integrated

methods course. The study's findings indicated that collaborative teaching of an integrated

methods course was beneficial to both instructors and pre-service teachers (Zhou, 2011).

Instructors felt that collaborative teaching was a reciprocal learning process wherein educators

were engaged in thinking about teaching in a broader and more innovative way. Pre-service

teachers felt that the collaborative course not only helped them understand how three different

subjects could be related to each other, but also provided opportunities for them to actually see how collaboration could take place in teaching (Zhou, 2011). Combined, educators' understanding of collaborative teaching was notably enhanced after the course (Zhou, 2011). Zhou (2011) indicated that when teachers have the opportunity to actually see and experience collaboration, they can expand their teaching in a broader and more innovative way.

Meirinka, Imants, Meijer, and Verloop (2010) provided another perspective of collaboration when they investigated the role of interdependence in teacher collaboration teams. This study sought to find the relationship between innovative teacher teams of collaboration and learning in Dutch secondary education schools and the influence of interdependence. The purpose of the innovative teams was to design and experiment with new teaching practices that functioned within reform contexts. Meirinka et al.'s (2010) study "show[ed] that interdependence in the working relationships within the teams played a key role in teacher learning" (p.175). The results of this study illustrated that collaboration and learning were closely interconnected (Meirinka et al., 2010). Altogether, the research suggested that in order to heighten the effectiveness of innovative teacher learning, standards that address sharing expectations must be put into place and teachers must be stimulated by leaders and coaches in order to have the opportunity to experiment with alternative teaching methods and practices.

Creating a collaborative culture requires a committed staff that desires to work together (Goodnough, 2010). Habeeb, Moore, and Seibert (2008) found that "any attempt at high school reform or school improvement must focus, first and foremost, on ways to strengthen the teacher's ability to have an impact in the classroom" (p. 5). Goodnough (2010) stated that collaboration is essential because it blurs the lines between novice and expert teachers. When

the lines are blurred between novice and expert teachers, all teachers are better able to work together systematically to support each other in learning and reaching shared goals.

Professional Learning Communities for Teachers

With regards to implementing collaboration into teachers' professional development models, there must first be a foundation for fostering teachers' collaborative efforts and development. The foundation for collaboration is created through the use of professional communities of practice—i.e. teacher interaction with grade-level teams, departments, or whole faculty meetings must be established (Levine & Marcus, 2007). Professional communities of practice are able to develop when individuals are engaged in a common enterprise and working toward shared outcomes (Levine & Marcus, 2007). Professional communities of practice can be key elements for producing positive effects on teachers and classroom instruction, elements that when utilized effectively can lead to improved student performance (Linder, Post, & Calabrese, 2012). "When teachers participate in professional development, other teachers can benefit from participants' transfer of expertise though interactions that address needs or problems of instructional practice" (Sun et al., 2013, p. 348). Hart (2013) provided a formal definition of a professional learning community. Hart (2013) said it "is an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (p. 12). The reputation of professional learning communities remains grounded in the notion that teacher growth does not happen in isolation, but instead in learning communities where participants engage in meaningful collaboration with peers in order to co-construct knowledge about teaching and learning. Likewise, creating environments that integrate a common vision and reflections on learning processes and practices is important (Musanti & Lucretia, 2010). Musanti and Lucretia (2010) contended that redefining

professional development as a positive force for change instead of as an obstacle for growth can limit resistance and tensions. Nonetheless, professional learning communities that make use of collaboration are central to transforming teachers' practice.

Based on the increase in accountability of students and districts' desires to improve teacher effectiveness, Connecticut's Stamford Public Schools implemented professional learning communities into 20 schools during the 2007-2008 annual school year. Notably, in 2009, test (Connecticut state test) results illustrated strong improvements in student achievement, which in part was credited to the use of PLCs (Thessin & Starr, 2011). Although the use of PLCs comes highly recommended, not all PLCs are created equal. Throughout Stamfords PLCs' implementation process, the district made sure to stay connected with the ideas, needs, and challenges of its teachers. Stamford realized that even with adults as learners, a revamp of the functions of PLCs, inclusive of incorporating other initiatives, was necessary in order to strengthen PLCs as well as increase effectiveness. The difference in this district's PLCs was tiered and differentiated supports and training sessions specifically targeted towards meeting the development needs of teachers.

Similarly, Williams (2003) conducted investigations at Taft School and City Park School to understand why professional learning communities work. Essentially, one principal at City Park School shared that teachers need to work with other teachers and be removed from isolation in order for learning to be exciting (Williams, 2003). Linder, Post, and Calabrese (2012) indicated that professional learning communities "enable teachers to customize and personalize their professional development, and they can develop a sense of ownership through self-directed learning" (p. 20). When teachers develop support systems and communities that empower

classroom instruction, both students and teachers benefit and can experience increased success and achievement.

Though Adlai E. Stevenson High School initially pioneered professional learning communities, the purpose of the PLCs was not to create something new or different. The idea was instead to foster an atmosphere where teachers could benefit from one another and share their expertise, with the common goal of enhancing student achievement. The superintendent of this school district in Illinois described professional learning communities as "'teachers working smarter by working together'" (Honawar, 2008, p. 27). Honawar (2008) continued by explaining that implementing PLCs requires a deep cultural change within a school and that each school must tailor PLCs to meet specific needs instead of just copying an existing model or framework. Within this research, another school's principal, Mattos, followed the works of Adlai E. Stevenson High School and made use of collaborative teams. Mattos found that teachers at Pioneer Middle School preferred to work in teams collaboratively and not in isolation, because doing so was good for both the students and the teachers (Honawar, 2008). Though encouraging schools, districts, and teachers to collaborate does not cost any additional money, making use of collaboration in professional learning communities does require time (Honawar, 2008). However, when structured well initially and revised as needed, professional learning communities can be one of the most effective ways to improve student learning.

Affirming the need for professional learning communities, Butler and Schnellert (2012) suggested a need for professional learning communities not only to embrace collaboration initiatives, but also to adopt an inquiry stance that assists teachers in persevering in the exploration and application of new ideas. Butler and Schnellert conducted a case study over the course of several years within an urban, multicultural school district in western Canada. Three

schools, two with students in grades eight through twelve, and one with students in grades seven through nine, were selected for participation. Butler and Schnellert followed a community of three literacy leaders and 15 teachers who were already working collaboratively in professional learning communities to build students' learning through reading and design practices that enhance student learning in subject-area classrooms. This study defined inquiry as teachers engaged in framing problems from new perspectives, setting goals, selecting and adapting strategic activities, and using research and evidence to generate solutions, while trying and evaluating new ideas (Butler & Schnellert, 2012). Such a definition of inquiry suggests that teachers learn through experimenting and reflecting on new teaching strategies. Results of this case study revealed that teachers were highly motivated to revise their instructional practices in order to achieve better student outcomes.

Kennedy's (2011) research supported and expanded on Butler and Schnellert's (2012) findings. The use of inquiry in professional learning communities helps educators discuss together in different ways, which promotes increased professional knowledge and a deeper understanding of content, instructional practices, and student learning (Kennedy, 2011). For teachers in professional learning communities, "an inquiry stance provides both the motivation and energy for engaging teachers and leaders in the hard work of understanding and making changes to practices resulting in student learning and achievement" (Kennedy, 2011, p. 42). Beyond the use of collaborative teacher inquiry, professional learning communities provide the benefit of shared or distributed leadership in schools. Nonetheless, leadership plays a fundamental role in providing the supportive environment for teacher learning and collaborative inquiry (Kennedy, 2011). Kennedy (2011) found when a culture of distributed leadership is established and shared with teachers in relation to the structure and processes of professional

learning communities, teachers are empowered and are more willing to assume new roles and responsibilities and shared accountability for student learning and achievement.

Admiraal, Akkerman, and de Graaff (2012) also presented information concerning the value of teacher communities and revealed that professional learning communities allow teachers an opportunity to develop their own teaching practices within the workplace in a more natural way. "Collaboration within teacher communities is a way to counter isolation, improve teacher practice and create a shared vision towards schooling" (Admiraal, Akkerman, & de Graaff, 2012, p. 274). Admiraal, Akkerman, and de Graaff (2012) further identified two positive effects of professional learning communities: increased self-confidence and enthusiasm of teachers to continue experimenting with new pedagogical approaches in the classrooms. When teachers participate in professional learning communities, they are able to spend time discussing professional experiences with colleagues, communicating pedagogical ideas, and observing each other's lessons (Admiraal, Akkerman, & de Graaff, 2012). According to Admiraal, Akkerman, and de Graaff, when teachers were allowed to collaborate with others in an environment they were familiar with, they were more able to grow professionally.

The design of teacher collaborative teams in professional learning communities affects the degree of teacher learning and development (Voogt et al., 2011). Voogt et al. (2011) sought to gain more insights from previously published studies regarding the processes of collaborative design in teacher design teams (TDT) that fostered teacher learning and development. Below is an analysis of high-quality, peer-reviewed literature that discussed collaboration, design process, curricular product, and empirical evidence of teacher design teams that improved or changed classroom practice. In general, Voogt et al. (2011) found that the design process of teacher teams was classified into several primary stages: Problem analysis, design and development,

implementation, and evaluation, which are inclusive of teacher reflection and enactment. Altogether, the results of this analysis showed that continued stimuli and support were crucial in directing the learning paths of teachers, whereas a lack of direction resulted in negative outcomes (Voogt et al., 2011). Moreover, teacher "reflection and enactment during collaborative design activities had an impact on job satisfaction and on teacher self-confidence" (Voogt et al., 2011, p. 1244). While the process, functionality, and design of teacher collaborative teams may vary, the ultimate outcome of increased teacher effectiveness, changed student learning outcomes, and improved teacher instructional practices develop with the support of professional learning communities.

Meirink et al. (2009) examined the relationship between the learning activities of 34 Dutch secondary education teachers and changes in pedagogical beliefs via a questionnaire. In this study, teachers were asked to present information on learning activities undertaken on two separate occasions. The study focused on three issues: self-regulation of learning, learning as active construction of knowledge, and the social nature of learning. Conclusively, Meirink et al. (2009) reported, "Although beliefs are often found to be difficult to change, we found that collaboration with colleagues led to such changes: the exchange of experiences and methods clearly promoted experimentation with the methods of colleagues" (p. 98). Meirink et al. (2009) also discussed research findings that contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of how teacher learning takes place in collaboration, and asserted that collaboration between teachers constitutes a powerful learning environment. Teachers have the potential to create learning environments targeted towards student success, but teachers need exposure to, connection to, and collaborative experiences with colleagues.

Teachers participating in collaborative professional learning communities should establish and understand their roles as collaborators. Subramaniam (2010) conducted a qualitative collaborative action research study focused on five secondary science teachers' changing roles when they taught with computer technology. For the purpose of this research, collaborative action research was defined as "an approach that supports teachers as researchers coming together to explore, examine, and negotiate issues" concerning instruction (Subramaniam, 2010, p. 938). Collectively, the significance of this study was to understand teachers' changing roles as facilitators and to improve pedagogical practice through active knowledge, learning, transformation, and empowerment (Subramaniam, 2010). When the participants were confronted with using technology in classroom instruction, they realized the need to alter their instructional planning, as well as how they controlled students' learning activities and accounted for students' learning. Teachers assigned roles for students and additional roles for themselves as participants. In this case, teachers were encouraged to collaborate with each other and discuss classroom experiences. Through interviews, observations, and most importantly, group discussions and autobiographical reflections, teachers were able to negotiate changes and realize their individual teaching roles and how these roles changed when they were confronted with using technology in classroom instruction.

Similar to Butler & Schnellert's (2012) case study conclusions, Subramaniam (2010) called attention to the power of teacher reflection after teachers had the opportunity to engage in meaningful collaborative discussions about instructional experiences. When solid discussions take place in collaborative professional learning communities, teachers' ability to impact instructional planning and approaches to student learning heightens.

Conclusively, the most powerful strategy for improving teacher learning is creating a collaborative culture and collective responsibility of a professional learning community (PLC), since PLCs are likely to improve instruction (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). Further, PLCs have two powerful levers that are useful in changing adult behavior: irrefutable evidence for better results and positive peer pressure (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). Dufour and Mattos (2013) discussed research which showed that teachers in schools that have embraced PLCs are more likely to:

- take collective responsibility for student learning, help students achieve at higher levels, and express higher levels of professional satisfaction (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011).

- share teaching practices, make results transparent, engage in critical conversations about improving instruction, and institutionalize continual improvement (Bryk et al., 2010).

- improve student achievement and their professional practice at the same time that they promote shared leadership (Louis et al., 2010).

- experience the most powerful and beneficial professional development (Little, 2006).

- remain in the profession (Johnson & Kardos, 2007; DuFour & Mattos, 2013).

Finally, the role of mentors throughout the collaborative process cannot be underestimated. Mentors are necessary to ensure leadership can be established that encourages discussions and contributions from both novice and experienced teachers, since practitioners possess a variety of experiences and influence (McCann, 2010). In total, multiple dynamics exist in order to create the conditions for collaborative models to play an important role in how teacher professional development continues to be redefined, specifically between general education and special education teachers (Pugach et al., 2011). Pugach et al. (2011) also discussed the fundamental impossibility to achieve real collaboration without schools and teachers first building a shared community of practice.

Role of Administrators in a Collaborative School

Although emphasis was placed on teachers' roles in professional learning communities, principals also play a key role in building trust and nurturing the relationships of and between teachers within professional learning communities. Cranston (2011) examined the nature of relational trust among teachers and between the teachers and principals within professional learning communities in urban, suburban, and rural communities in Manitoba. A total of 12 principals from elementary and secondary schools, reflecting a mix of private, public, mixed, small, medium, and large schools were selected as participants. Cranstan (2011) argued that the absence of relational trust between principals and faculty caused the knowledge, expertise, and determination to nurture teachers in professional learning communities to fall flat. Analysis revealed five key themes supporting relational trust as a critical component of professional learning communities. Cranston (2011) found that:

- trust develops as teachers are in relationships,

- relational trust requires establishing group norms around risk taking and change orientation,

- relational trust supports effective collaboration,

- principals have central roles in establishing a climate of trust, and

- faculty's reciprocation of trust in the principal becomes paramount.

In order to see change that impacts and improves learning outcomes, principals "need to form and nurture trusting relationships that allow them to go beneath the surface matters typically discussed among teachers and engage them in conversations at deeper emotional levels about student achievement school-wide" (Cranston, 2011, p. 67). Effective, transformative professional learning communities within schools are built and sustained when principals are

committed to building trusting and nurturing relationships with teachers and fostering collaboration with and among teachers.

Challenges of Collaborative Instruction

The use of collaborative learning models in classroom instruction can pose challenges. The literature outlined two common challenges associated with the use of collaborative learning models: Partner placements and student diversity.

Partner Placements. Using collaborative learning models poses challenges. More specifically, one challenge teachers face is partner placements designed to create a more supportive and collaborative climate for teaching learning, regardless of the educational level or setting (Gardnier, 2010). Gardnier's (2010) study concluded that teachers should seek to group students based on academic and social learning needs. Teachers are learners and students are learners as well. Gardiner's (2010) research indicated that partner placements require mutuality, investment, and the willingness and ability of the teacher to guide partner placements since partner placements alone do not guarantee effective collaboration and learning, even though they provide a structure for collaboration to take place. Teachers need to use rationales for partner placements in order to "distribute the risk of intellect, and support the implementation of more creative and engaging lessons," in addition to providing ongoing feedback and requiring frequent, open, honest, and critical communication and support (Gardiner, 2010, p. 213). When teachers invest time on the front end into developing their students' collaborative learning groups, instructional time can be maximized and distractions minimized. Students will have clearly defined roles that will allow them to use their time wisely.

Student Diversity. Increases in cultural diversity has also impacted student performance. Students' cultural experiences cannot be discredited in regards to learning experiences.

Specifically, Zhu (2012) found that cultural differences can impact and influence students' experiences—questioning, discussing, engaging, and contributing—with collaboration; therefore, teachers need to determine whether an innovative approach can be applied in a sustainable way. Establishing a collaborative culture promotes an increase in students' perceived satisfaction and performance in any collaborative learning environment. Zhu (2012) stated, "Learning with peers may benefit not only the overall individual performance, it may also enhance team performance by increasing the quality of team product" (p. 133). Generally speaking, collaborative learning methods differ from traditional lecture and discussion courses in their ability to promote the development of students' problem-solving, communication, and group participation skills.

Summary

This chapter illustrated the key components, theories, and relevant research that provided the necessary foundation for the current study on collaborative instruction. The literature review included a discussion of the theoretical frameworks used to guide the study, Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivism theory and Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive theory. Combined, these theories highlighted the mental, social, and cultural processes used in the collaborative learning process.

The reasons for educational reform that meets the needs of the ever-changing diverse population of students within schools were also explained. In this section, mentions of technological advances and the high demand employers have for employees who can work well on teams validated the importance and use of collaboration. Schools need to create a culture of learning that meets the needs of all students but also challenges students to expand their critical thinking skills. According to Narzeno (2014), "If schools are to become what students need them to be, then students must see their teachers engaged in cognitive challenges that push their

creativity and collaboration. Through this modeling, students can begin to develop those skills themselves" (p. 24).

Next, the effectiveness of schools adopting collaborative learning models both for students and teachers was explored. Within this section, definitions, descriptions, and strategies were discussed as a way to frame the value of collaborative instruction. The research indicated that the effective implementation of collaborative learning models promotes learning and community.

Finally, collaboration for teachers as a professional development tool was discussed at length. Research has indicated that educators need opportunities to learn how to collaborate and must have facilitators and coaches readily available throughout the development process (Subramaniam, 2010). With increased accountability for teachers and a focus on differentiating instruction for diverse student learners, schools and districts are prompted to develop plans that prepare all students and teachers for the demands ahead.

The literature suggested that in order for collaborative learning models to work, teachers must be equipped with the proper tools, education, and supportive professional learning communities necessary to reach students. The transformation of the American educational system through collaborative learning models depends largely on who leads the efforts and how educational leaders define the roles of educators in building collaborative learning models. Professional learning communities provide a way for teachers to experience greater levels of task completion. Increased national and state mandates identified the importance of ongoing, meaningful professional development, especially concerning collaborative learning models. Futrell (2011) argued, "Comprehensive, not incremental, change will occur only if we work together—school leaders (defined as administrators, teachers, and counselors), parents, students,

and the community" (p. 647). Through the use of PLCs, teachers can feel more supported in their efforts to promote increased student performance and success, and can also feel free to reflect, discuss their challenges with other teachers, and establish relationships with effective communication.

Increasing teacher effect in schools becomes more challenging when the specific needs of teachers are not considered across various schools, districts, and states. As a result, the gap in the literature calls for more attention to be devoted to understanding the perceptions of freshman Language Arts teachers and their experiences with professional development sessions, as well as the perceptions of an administrator and of an administrator's experiences with professional development sessions in order to improve practices so that all educators can meet the diverse needs of student learners.

The next chapter addresses the methodology of this study and includes the qualitative design and phenomenological approach used in the research. Participants, setting, research questions, and participants are discussed in more detail.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of my qualitative, phenomenological study is to understand freshmen Language Arts teachers', students', and one administrator's perceptions of and experiences with collaborative learning models at a suburban school outside of a major city in central Georgia. My research set out to address the gap in the literature regarding how suburban schools can design and implement more relevant, effective, and personalized professional learning sessions and mentoring programs for teachers based on collaborative learning models that promote improved teacher practice and student success. For the purposes of this study, freshmen Language Arts teachers', students', and one administrator's perceptions and experiences were studied. In order to allow teacher, student, and administrator participants to share personal experiences, semi-structured interviews served as the data collection method in this phenomenological research study. Previously, the literature review outlined how collaborative learning models have improved a school's climate between teachers and students, as well as increased student success and outcomes. Within this chapter, a discussion of the research design and the rationale for the research design, data collection methods, data analysis, site selection, and a description of the participants are presented. Chapter Three concludes with my role as the researcher, along with a discussion of the ethical considerations taken during the research.

Design

When research addresses local issues, it can be especially powerful because the accountability of constituents and the effectiveness of educational practices are enhanced, thereby increasing communication, relationships, and collaboration (Sallee & Flood, 2012). Sallee and Flood (2012) suggested that in order for educational research to be useful and

accessible for teachers' knowledge-base and practice, it must be relevant and aim to do more than inform practice or policy.

Qualitative Research

Increasingly, education researchers are being charged to produce research that is relevant and accessible to multiple constituencies. Because of this charge, qualitative research is particularly compelling due to its significant strengths: Its focus on context and use of emergent design and thick description (Sallee & Flood, 2012). Qualitative research allows for a deeper, more holistic understanding of the problem under investigation, as well as offers outlets through which to disseminate findings for making improvements within education. Sallee and Flood (2012) argued, "Qualitative research is relevant for research in educational contexts and may also hold the key to bridging these two (the education community, including policy makers, and those outside of the education community) cultures" (p. 138). "Qualitative research, with its use of thick description, offers research results that might be more easily understandable than the numbers and statistics offered through quantitative data" (Sallee & Flood, 2012, p. 141). Qualitative formatted research is easier to disseminate and understand, which can enhance the communication between researchers and constituents—those individuals inside the realm of education and those outside the realm of education. Effective communication can capture the interest and lend to the receptivity of decision-makers, two crucial qualities education researchers need in order be able to propose viable solutions to problems in education.

According to Kemparaj and Chavan (2013), qualitative research "refers to a range of methodological approaches which aim to generate an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world, by learning about people's social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives, and histories" (p. 90). Furthermore, "qualitative research aims to explore, interpret,

or obtain a deeper understanding of social phenomena" through questioning, exploring, and understanding from a contrasting perspective (Kemparaj & Chavan, 2013, p. 90). Qualitative research delves heavily into exploration of the research topic.

In order to contribute useful and relevant information that can be replicated to the body of research in education, I employed qualitative research in this study. The six characteristics of qualitative research outlined by Kemparaj and Chavan (2013) can be applied to the current research study:

- Analysis makes use of non-numeric information.

- Researcher becomes intensely involved.

- Phenomena are explored from the participant's perspective and there is a focus on meaning and understanding.

- Social context is emphasized in studying the phenomena in a natural environment, rather than in an experimental one.

- Data collection and analysis are flexible and allow for the exploration of emergent issues.

- Output generated is distinctive in the form of detailed descriptions, classifications, typologies, patterns of association, and explanations.

Based on the definition, purposes, and implications for qualitative research mentioned above, a qualitative design was chosen for this current research study.

Phenomenology

The current transcendental phenomenological research study focused on participants' lived experiences with collaborative instruction. A study that focuses on the nature of experience from the point of view of the person experiencing a phenomenon and that examines

the qualities or essence of an experience through interviews qualifies as a phenomenological

study (Connelly, 2010). Phenomenology has its roots in Sociology. Silverman (1972) outlined

the phenomenological foundations of research derived by Husserl as being: Structure and

functioning of human consciousness—the cognitive setting of the life-world, the character of

social action, and the character of the social world. Connelly (2010) cited two main approaches

in phenomenological studies: The descriptive approach, developed by Husserl, wherein

researchers bracket or put aside presuppositions or biases to avoid affecting the study, and the

interpretative approach, developed by Heidegger, wherein researchers do not support putting

aside one's ideas and how such ideas may impact the research study. In the current research

study, I conducted interviews to unveil participants' experiences with collaborative learning and

bracketed my own personal ideas and experiences from the study (Connelly, 2010). Connelly

states that in phenomenological studies:

> The phenomenon is studied in fewer people, but in more depth than would be possible in
>
> a survey or other type of research. The purpose of this kind of research is to become
>
> deeply involved in the data and therefore the phenomenon. Data will consist mainly of
>
> interviews with the people experiencing the phenomenon, but also may include
>
> observations, examination of artifacts, and other materials when appropriate. Researchers
>
> who conduct the interviews need to be skillful interviewers who can elicit the detail
>
> needed to answer the research question. (p. 127)

Schutz was another philosopher who contributed to the world of phenomenology. Schutz

pursued interests in phenomenological philosophy proceeding Husserl. Along with colleague

Kaufman, Schutz studied Husserl's work and attempting to find a basis for the phenomenology

of the social world (Kersten, 2002). Schutz "dealt with the means by which an individual orients

himself in life situations, his 'store of experience' and his 'stock of knowledge on hand,'" along with analyzing the "natural attitude" and the dominant factors affecting the conduct of individuals in the life-world (Wagner, 2008, p. 15). Schutz investigated the concepts of phenomenology and explained the multifaceted experience of sub-universes (or multiple realities) as a phenomenon for phenomenological clarification on a level and with a foundation entirely different from Husserl and philosophers such as James and Brentano (Kersten, 2002).

Nasu (2008) refers to Schutz's (1953) theory of relevance as primarily concerning itself with the selection of facts from the totality of lived experience. Moreover, Schutz (1953) believed that ''…there are no such things as facts, pure and simple. All facts are from the outset facts selected from a universal context by the activities of our mind. They are, therefore, always interpreted facts'' (As cited in Nasu, 2008, p. 92). Within this framework, the process of selection from the totality of lived experience refers to how individuals perceive, recognize, interpret, know, and act; in a word, the process of selection refers to the experience of objects and events (Nasu, 2008). Schutz's work presents the concept of subjectively meaningful action, a step toward a phenomenological based sociology of the natural attitude (Hall, 1977).

Schutz's methodological position differs from Husserl's transcendental phenomenological position in that there is the disinterested observer who is not involved in the life of the observed and the "research objects," what the scientist wishes to interpret. Further, Ruggerone (2013) cited Schutz's recommendation and theorized that a subject has to:

suspend his subjective point of view, [and becomes] only a partial self, a taker of a

role…this partial self lacks all essentially actual experiences and all experiences

connected with his own body, its movements, and its limits. Consequently, the scientist

becomes a disembodied being who operates in a context of pure ideas and proceeds by

referring to a disciplinary stock of knowledge to construct scientific models of the

situations he/she is studying. Schutz maintains that the theorizing Self is placed outside

common objective time; its past consists of the theoretical heritage of its discipline that

creates a universe of discourse based on the previously achieved results and therefore

separate from the life world. (p. 189)

Transcendental Phenomenology

Phenomenological studies carry categorizations beyond the descriptive and interpretative

approaches to two distinct types: Hermeneutic and transcendental. Thomasson (2007) cited

Zahavi's bold response in that "Phenomenology is a special form of transcendental philosophy"

(p. 86). Thomasson (2007) further discussed that transcendental phenomenology concerns itself

with uncovering the *conditions of the possibility* of having certain types of conscious experiences

or representations. Husserl, a mathematician turned philosopher, spread theories about sociology

and phenomenology throughout Germany. Specifically, Husserl's concepts focus on *epoche,* the

suspension of all judgements about what is real (As cited in Creswell, 2013). Following in the

footsteps of Husserl, Moustakas's (1994) idea of transcendental phenomenology evolved and

holds promise as a viable procedure for phenomenological research (Creswell, 2013).

Moustakas (1994) stated that transcendental phenomenology focuses less on the interpretations

of the researcher and more on the experiences of the participants (As cited in Creswell, 2013)

and takes on the view "in which everything is freshly perceived, as if for the first time" (p. 80).

Epoche (bracketing) is recommended for transcendental phenomenological studies

(Creswell, 2013). Giorgi (2009) viewed "this bracketing as a matter not of forgetting what has

been experienced, but of not letting past knowledge be engaged while determining experiences"

(As cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 79). Bracketing refers to a method used by researchers "to

mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor" of a research project (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 81). When the relationship between the researcher and research topic may sometimes be too close, bracketing is used as a method to protect the researcher from emotionally challenging material associated with the research study (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

The use of bracketing can avoid skewed research results and interpretations, in that the preconceptions of the researcher can influence how data are gathered, interpreted, and presented (Tufford & Newman, 2012). The bracketing method stresses the importance of the researcher being honest and vigilant about existing prior knowledge, experiences, biases, and assumptions, then suspending those beliefs during the research study in order to be open minded. Connelly (2010) asserted how crucial rigor or trustworthiness affects phenomenological studies:

> Rigor should focus on neutrality, which involves reflecting on and identifying any possible researcher biases (bracketing) as well as discussing the progress of the study periodically with colleagues to ensure the researcher is aware of any biases and prevent premature closure of the analysis. (p. 128)

Since I possess knowledge from professional, educational, and personal experiences regarding the impact of collaborative instruction, I may therefore hold preconceptions and biases about collaborative instruction. For the purpose of this study, my experiences with collaborative instruction were bracketed, or set aside as much as possible, in order to allow me to take on new perspectives of the phenomenon being studied.

For the current research study, Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach was used to gain a better understanding of students' and teachers' perceptions of collaborative learning models (Creswell, 2013), similar to Linkenhoker's (2012) research study

of teachers' perspectives for improving teacher education programs. The purpose of the transcendental, phenomenological research design was to document and illustrate the lived experiences of freshman Language Arts students, teachers, and one administrator with the phenomenon of collaborative instruction.

Research from Walker and Greene (2009) indicated that student perceptions are related to and are predictors of many cognieve-motivational constructs. The themes found in the participants' perceptions from the data collected from face-to-face semi-structured interviews was used to design effective professional learning communities and mentoring programs for teachers. The design and implementation of effective professional learning communities and mentoring programs can improve teacher effect and promote increased student achievement (Dufour & Mattos, 2013; Kennedy, 2011; Honawar, 2008; Linder, Post, & Calabrese, 2012).

A study conducted by Gueye (2012) sought to determine the perceptions of mentoring relationships for female, adult mentors and protégés in a middle school and a community, faith-based youth leadership and development organization. In this study, Gueye (2012) used a phenomenological approach to determine the lived experiences of participants with the phenomenon of mentoring relationships. The data provided a description of the essence of the experience for all participants, allowing the researcher to unveil the three greatest supports girls need in order to develop and thrive in the 21st century: Love, support, and freedom of expression.

Based on the results of Gueye's (2012) study, along with the implications of transcendental phenomenology, using a phenomenological study was deemed the best approach in that it allows the researcher to uncover which experiences of collaborative learning promote increased learning and retention rates for freshmen Language Arts students over the course of two semesters.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this research study:

Research Question 1: What are freshman Language Arts students' perceptions of

collaborative learning models used in teachers' instructional practices?

Research Question 2: What are freshman Language Arts teachers' perceptions of

collaborative learning models used in instructional practices?

Research Question 3: What values are tied to freshman Language Arts teachers' and

freshman Language Arts students' experiences with collaborative learning?

Research Question 4: What are the barriers that inhibit freshman Language Arts

general education and special education teachers' ability to use collaborative learning

models to meet the needs of diverse learners? How can these barriers be overcome?

Setting

The setting for the current research study was a small high school, Falcons Rise Up

(pseudonym) (FRU), in a suburban county outside of a major central city in Georgia. FRU

resides in one of the largest and most advanced school districts in the South East United States.

Up until recently, FRU was the smallest school in the district. In an effort to protect the identity

of the school, a pseudonym, FRU, was used.

FRU was chosen as the setting for this research study because FRU met the needs of

diverse learners and elevated student learning, achievement, and success, while focusing on

successful implementation of collaborative learning models. Currently, FRU continues as the

second smallest school in the district with a student population that not only becomes more and

more diverse each year, but also increases in the percentage of students with disabilities.

Furthermore, FRU's percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch also increases

yearly, which presents challenges for teachers in the academic classroom. FRU was chosen for the current research study because despite the continual increase in enrollment of students with disabilities and students receiving free and reduced lunch, FRU remains a non-Title1 school, but encounters many of the same academic challenges Title 1 schools face regarding finding ways to meet the academic needs of diverse student learners. At the time of the research study, FRU had a student population of approximately 1,901 students.

In 2008, FRU began revamping its approach to designing professional development opportunities for teachers. As a result, FRU implemented "Collaboration for Achievement," a unique professional learning opportunity for teachers, into the staff development catalogue, which allowed teachers to earn service hours within the local school. At this location, teachers were encouraged to take proactive measures and intervene, rather than reactive measures, in an effort to maintain and continue a focus on teaching and learning, thus promoting critical thinkers and doers. For many veteran teachers at FRU high school, the mere idea of using collaborative learning models overwhelmed and intimidated them, especially after a climate of independent planning and teaching had been established for decades.

Currently, the breakdown at FRU is comprised of 1% American Indian/Alaskan Indian, 3% Asian, 35% African American, 17% Hispanic or Latino, 4% multiracial, 40% Caucasian, 13% Special Education, 1% ELL, and 44% Free/Reduced Lunch (*Results-Based Education System Accountability Report,* 2014). Overall test scores, inclusive of SAT and AP scores, continue to prove favorable. Additionally, FRU continues to be recognized in *Newsweek Magazine's* top 5% schools in the nation.

Participants

According to Creswell (2013), the researcher should work to limit the number of sites or participants in qualitative studies so that extensive details about each site or individual can be carefully studied. Creswell (2013) referenced Dukes (1994) who recommended studying three to 10 subjects and one phenomenology in phenomenological research studies. In phenomenological studies, only participants who have all experienced and can articulate lived experiences with a particular phenomenon should be selected. Therefore, the selection of participants needs to follow some preset criteria and only consist of participants who have experience with a particular phenomenon. Creswell (2013) stated, "The more diverse the characteristics of the individuals, the more difficult it will be for the researcher to find common experiences, themes, and overall essence of the lived experience for all participants" (p. 150). Therefore, randomly selecting participants without carefully gaining knowledge as to whether a participant has or has not experienced a phenomenon with collaborative learning does not fulfill the purpose of the researcher's investigation. Criterion sampling makes use of participants who have experienced a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). When the researcher selects participants for a study based on a specific type of sampling strategy, as well as selecting the site of the sample to be studied, the researcher has opted to use a purposeful sample (Creswell, 2013).

For the current study, a purposeful, criterion-based selection of 10 students who have experienced the phenomenon of collaborative instruction and could purposefully inform the interviewer of their experiences were pulled from one to two classes of freshman college preparatory Language Arts classes that contained approximately 29-37 students. The final selection of the participants was based both on student and parental consent and school approval

(Creswell, 2013). In qualitative research, purposeful sampling is used to select and observe a small number of people whose study produces an in-depth understanding of the people, cases, and situations (Yilmaz, 2013). In the current study, the phenomenon was FRU freshman Language Arts students' experiences with collaborative instruction. A purposeful, convenient, criterion sample consists of participants who were accessible within FRU and had experienced the phenomenon of collaborative instruction.

I began the selection process began with freshman students' previous year's (8th grade) Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) Language Arts scores (a score of less than 75 qualified a student for the study). At FRU, the use of ITBS scores as a means for narrowing the sample was significant to the study as students with 75+ ITBS scores are generally placed in honors or gifted Language Arts courses where the use of collaboration in the curriculum occurs frequently. Because both freshman honors and gifted students are more autonomous learners, typically these levels of students work in groups to complete projects and other tasks more frequently than do college preparatory students. Primarily, freshman college preparatory students complete collaborative activities less frequently since they require more guided assistance. New participants may be solicited if necessary to maintain a sample of 10 participants. The selection of participants and the solicitation of new participants was based on availability of scheduling needs and county approval. Of these participants, four males and five females, ages 14-15 were used in this study; two of these participants were special needs students. In general, participants were from varying racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly from the African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic ethnic background. Two veteran freshmen Language Arts teachers and two veteran freshman Language Arts special education teacher were used in this study. One veteran administrator was also used in this study. Participants possessed

the ability to articulate clearly enough and explain their perceptions of and experiences with

collaborative learning for an interview that lasted less than an hour.

Procedures

Prior to data collection, I gained the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB)

and the local school (See Appendix A for IRB approval). Following IRB and local school

approval, participants were given consent and assent forms to complete prior to the collection of

data. In May of the spring semester of 2015, a purposeful sample of 10 freshmen Language Arts

students, two freshmen Language Arts teachers and two freshman Language Arts special

education collaborative teachers participated in semi-structured interviews. In April of 2016, one

department administrator participated in a semi-structured interview. Of the 10 student

participants, nine student participants returned the consent and assent forms with parental

signatures and agreed to participate in the study. All nine students were considered eligible for

the study. I maintained copies of all signed consent and assent forms. Recruitment of additional

student participants was not necessary since a sufficient number of eligible student participants

agreed to participate in the research study. Prior to conducting interviews, I piloted the interview

questions with two of the four teacher participants and with two of the nine student participants.

In some cases, rephrasing the questions was necessary.

For the current phenomenological research study, interviews served as an appropriate

data collection method since teachers', students', and the administrator's perceptions with

collaborative instruction were explored. I recorded each interview. Each interview lasted less

than one hour in an effort to increase response effectiveness, meaningfulness, and focus of the

interview. All interviews were transcribed. None of the student participant interviews,

specifically for special needs students, needed to be broken into multiple segments to meet

students' diverse learning, thinking, and communicating skills. Two freshman Language Arts teachers and two freshman Language Arts special education collaborative teachers were interviewed formally one time in May of 2015, the spring semester after teachers had implemented ongoing collaborative learning opportunities into the classroom instruction of freshmen Language Arts classes. The administrator was interviewed in April of 2016.

All data collected was stored securely in a filing cabinet that locks. The filing cabinet could only be accessed by me. Furthermore, in order to protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used to identify participants. Data were analyzed to find commonalties, themes, and descriptions that conveyed the essence of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon of collaborative learning models.

The Researcher's Role

Currently, I am an Assistant Principal and Testing Coordinator in a high school within the school district. At this school, I am responsible for supporting and guiding the quality of the work of teachers, students, leaders, and community members. I have served in this capacity for almost two full school years. I work with teachers, leaders, and district personnel to implement improved instructional practices, diverse approaches, and methods for improving the success and development of students, teachers, and leaders, which are all guided by the most current and effective research. My role as a leader is not one that I take lightly. Continuously, I strive to empower and influence students, parents, leaders, and communities positively and professionally.

Previously, I served the school district as a 9th and 10th grade Language Arts teacher at FRU for 10 years. I worked with special education teachers, students, and parents for 10 years while at FRU, as well as with general education students. As a teacher, I worked directly with

teachers, administrators, and students in order to improve teachers' instructional practices, promote student engagement in the learning process, and improve student success by way of collaborative learning models and professional learning opportunities.

My experiences as a teacher at FRU and as a student in graduate school for the last eight years afforded me the chance to collaborate with and learn from many teachers and leaders from different schools and school districts. These experiences provided me with different perspectives and ideas about the process of learning and how to help students successfully prepare for the world after secondary education. Making a positive difference in the lives of others has been my life's passion since graduating high school. Couple that passion with the values I have that are tied to the power of education, and my desire to help all students maximize their potential and achieve their greatest success, regardless of diversity, learning styles, and challenges, continues to grow stronger.

During my first few years of teaching, I did not have a support system or mentoring program that allowed me and other teachers to reflect on strong and weak practices, hone professional skills, and generate ideas from veteran teachers without fear of seeming incompetent or incapable of teaching. Personally, I felt a decrease in my confidence as a teacher and was not inclined to seek out leadership roles within the school. During my first few years of teaching, I enrolled in a Master's Degree program and later into an Educational Specialist's program. It was in these two programs that I realized the power of having a strong support system where collaboration serves as the driving force, and in creating a community where teachers can share ideas and reflect, improve educational practices, and increase teacher effectiveness without feeling intimidated or embarrassed. As a teacher, I noticed a lack of meaningful professional development opportunities within the school setting. I saw the need for

more personalized, relevant professional development that equipped teachers with the knowledge, tools, and resources necessary to handle the challenges, expectations, and demands of the teaching realm. I learned that professional learning communities encourage the way teachers motivate students and impact students' ability to learn and be successful, as well as increase students' learning and academic success. Since FRU was one of the leading schools in changing its approach to professional learning opportunities and attempting to create a functional, effective culture of collaboration beginning in 2008, this site was appropriate for the current research study.

Despite all of my experiences with and perceptions of collaborative learning models, the current research study focuses on the descriptions provided by the participants. Creswell (2013) discussed Husserl's *epoche* (bracketing) concept of transcendental phenomenology. *Epoche* refers to when the researcher sets aside any personal experiences in order to reflect on the information provided by participants with a new perspective (Creswell, 2013). Because I wanted to know how teachers, administrators, and students around the school viewed collaborative learning models and the effectiveness such models present, *epoche* was appropriate for the study. Since the potential for biases and assumptions could affect the outcomes of the research study due to my previous experiences and knowledge base as a classroom teacher, using *epoche* allowed me to gain new information about collaborative learning models beyond my own understanding. Through data analysis, I excluded my understanding of collaborative learning in order to allow themes to emerge from the data. Once the themes were identified, I briefly used my own understanding of collaborative learning to compile and disseminate between the commonalities and differences of the themes that emerged from the data.

Data Collection

My study used interviewing as the primary source of data collection. According to Qu and Dumay (2013), "Interviews require a respect for curiosity about what people say and a systematic effort to really hear and understand what people say" (p. 239). Further, "interviews provide a useful way to learn about the world of others" (Qu & Dumay, 2013, p. 239). A recent transcendental phenomenological study conducted by Linkenhoker (2012) utilized interviews in order to give teachers a voice to express their self-efficacy beliefs and opinions on the effectiveness of teacher education programs to facilitate student learning of diverse populations, as well as suggestions for improving teacher education programs.

Data collection for phenomenological research studies typically involves interviewing multiple individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). When interviewing multiple individuals who have different experiences with and roles in collaborative instruction, triangulation occurs. The primary purpose of triangulation was to eliminate or reduce biases and to increase the reliability and validity of a study (Jonsen, 2009). Emphasis for this data collection method was on participants' description of the essence of their experiences. Data collection consisted of audio-recorded interviews with each teacher, student, and administrator participant in the study. Interviews lasted from 20-45 minutes in length. I used semi-structured questions to guide the interviews. Following the interviews, each recording of the interviews was transcribed using a Word document program. Primarily, interview questions were modeled after the Rubin and Rubin (2012) seven step responsive interviewing model, which closely mimicked the interviewing model of Kvale and Brinkman (2009). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) outlined the process for conducting interviews in seven stages: Thematizing the inquiry, designing the study, interviewing, transcribing the interview, analyzing the data,

verifying the validity, reliability and generalizability of the findings, and reporting the study. For the current study, the Rubin and Rubin (2012) seven step responsive interviewing model was an effective model because it allowed me more flexibility than the traditional Kvale and Brinkman (2009) model. Creswell (2013) pointed out that with the Rubin and Rubin model, the researcher's sequence of questioning participants was not fixed as it would be with the Kvale and Brinkman interview model, therefore allowing the researcher to change questions asked.

Brownell et al. (2011) discussed the importance of examining quality partnerships (inclusive of general education and special education teachers) for collaborative teacher education in the general education setting and the impact such partnerships have on supporting or hindering the development of appropriate conceptions of teaching and learning. A study conducted by Chance and Segura (2009) used semi-structured interviews to understand a rural high school's collaborative approach. Chance and Segura (2009) found that the interviewing process was effective in allowing participants to share their perspectives on curriculum, instruction, decision-making, change process, and stakeholder involvement. A benefit of using interviews was that they are able to be recorded and transcribed—contributing to more accurate records for coding and interpreting themes. A qualitative phenomenological research study completed by Dobson-Bryant (2011) made use of open-ended interview questions delivered via a face-to-face platform as a data collection method so that dialogue could be free flowing as participants offered their views.

In my research study, teacher, student, and one administrator's interviews were used to gain a better understanding of the perceptions and experiences with collaborative instruction. One phenomenological study that sought to understand the values and beliefs that underlie teachers' practices with the use of technology utilized semi-structured interviews as a data

collection method (Ottenbreit-Leftwich, Glazewski, Newby, and Ertmer, 2010). During these semi-structured interviews, teachers discussed their values and beliefs openly. Ottenbreit-Leftwich, Glazewski, Newby, and Ertmer (2010) argued that given that values and beliefs are internal to teachers, the best way to explicate these values and beliefs is through interviews. The goal of the research study was to better understand teachers' beliefs and values so that professional development and training initiatives that directly support teachers' needs could be created and transferred into the classroom (Ottenbreit-Leftwich et al., 2010).

Questions for the current research study were purposefully limited to encourage participants to freely share their experiences and views in connection to collaborative learning, and also to allow me, the researcher, control over the conversation. For the current research study, interviews served as an appropriate data collection method since I was attempting to learn about the world of collaborative experiences of teachers, students, and an administrator in a local high school setting.

However, before using interviews researchers must decide which method of interviewing is most appropriate since there are different types of interviews for qualitative data collection: Unstructured interviews, structured interviews, and semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2013). Unstructured interviews are informal, and during the interview process the interviewer develops, adapts, and generates questions reflecting the central purpose of the research (Qu & Dumay, 2013). Structured interviews ask interviewees a series of pre-established questions, thus allowing only a limited number of response categories—the interviewer reads from a script and offers little to no deviation from the script (Qu & Dumay, 2013). Semi-structured interviews "involve prepared questioning guided by identified themes in a consistent and systematic matter, interposed with probes designed to elicit more elaborate responses" (Qu & Dumay, 2013, p.

246). Qu and Dumay (2013) noted that semi-structured interviews are more flexible, accessible, intelligible, and capable of disclosing information and hidden facets of human and organizational behavior. Since access to interviewees was more limited in the current research study and the availability of time was at a premium, careful planning must take place prior to the interview (Qu & Dumay, 2013). Due to these factors, semi-structured interviews were chosen for the current research study.

Dobson-Bryant noted that semi-structured interviews provide the interviewer with an opportunity to make additions, deletions, omissions, or other changes to the nature and order of the questions as necessary (As cited in Lodico et al., 2009). Interviews were semi-structured and completed face-to-face in a quiet room within the school's setting, in whatever room was closest, available, and convenient for the participants and the interviewer at that time. Many locations within the school, such as the Media Center, conference room, and meeting room, were free from distractions and allowed the interview process to function smoothly and constructively. Interviews were tape recorded and remained under one hour in order to increase the meaningfulness and focus of the interviews (Creswell, 2013).

Teacher and Administrator Interviews

Two freshman Language Arts teachers and two special education collaborative teachers were interviewed once during the spring semester in the month of May after having experienced collaborative learning opportunities in the fall semester. One administrator was interviewed in April of 2016. Interview questions were organized and built upon one another conceptually. While interviews for the current research study followed the semi-structured, open-ended format, a pilot study was conducted to ensure validity of the study. According to Naoum (2007), prior to collecting final data from the whole sample of participants, researchers are advised to complete a

pilot study whenever questionnaires are constructed by the researcher. A trial run for the questionnaire, which tested the wording for ambiguous questions, the techniques for data collection, and the effectiveness of the measuring tools as well as the standard invitation to respondents provides researchers with valuable responses in order to detect possible shortcomings (Naoum, 2007).

According to Creswell (2013), interview questions and procedures can be further refined through pilot testing. Pilot testing refines and develops research instruments, assesses the degrees of observer biases, frames questions, collects background information, and adapts research procedures (Creswell, 2013). Piloting interview questions is necessary to gain a thorough knowledge of the work and system under investigation (Read, George, Westlake, & Williams, 1992). Another purpose of piloting is to detect possible sources of bias in a study (Read et al., 1992). A breakdown is needed of areas of weakness and strength within the study, therefore it is necessary "that the pilot study be carried out in the same setting as that chosen for the main study" (Read et al., 1992, p. 285). The goal of the pilot instrument is to invite comments about the perceived relevance of each question to the stated purpose of the research. Conducting the pilot study should also prepare the ground for the main study, which in this case investigated participants' perceptions of and experiences with collaborative instruction.

Interview questions were piloted in FRU's school setting at a convenient time that did not interrupt the teachers', students', or administrator's teaching and learning schedules, duties, and responsibilities. Interview questions were piloted with two freshmen students, one veteran freshmen Language Arts teacher, and one veteran freshmen Language Arts collaborative teacher. Interviews were piloted during the least disruptive times—in the mornings before the school day officially began, during lunches, and after school. Each interview remained under one hour.

During the interview process, I recorded notes on a legal pad. All pilot interview information was stored in a drawer of a locked filing cabinet that was only accessible to me; no identifying information was disclosed. Data from the pilot study was not included with data from the main study.

The following open-ended interview questions guided teacher responses:

1. How do you define collaborative learning models?

2. What experiences have you had with collaborative instruction, if any?

3. How, if at all, do you plan classroom instruction so that it encompasses some component of collaborative learning?

4. Based on the levels of student engagement and their performances during collaborative work, what leads you to believe, or not to believe, that your expectations are communicated clearly?

5. Explain what you enjoy about working collaboratively with other colleagues?

6. How has collaborative learning enhanced your competence and/or creativity as an educator?

7. Why do you believe that collaborative learning is, or is not, beneficial for both students and teachers and for teaching and learning?

8. With the move towards collaboration models, what do you feel local professional development sessions are lacking in relation to teacher preparation for effective collaboration amongst and between teachers?

9. Discuss which topics in connection to collaboration you would find most useful in a professional development session?

10. How do you feel about current teacher mentoring programs that utilize collaboration?

11. Explain why you think collaborative learning is helpful training for post-educational work.

12. Are there any other comments you'd like to make or mention or add in regards to your experiences with collaborative instruction?

Student Interviews

Nine freshman Language Arts students ages 14-15 were interviewed once during the spring semester of 2015. If needed, special needs students' interviews could have be broken into multiple segments in order to accommodate participants' diverse learning, thinking, and communicating skills. The following open-ended interview questions guide the student participants' interviews:

1. How do you define collaborative learning (learning that allows you to work with other students, teachers, staff, etc./group work)?

2. Courses that have collaborative learning opportunities (learning that allows you to work with other students, teachers, staff, etc./group work) benefit you, if at all, in what ways?

3. What is different about the expectations of collaborative ((learning that allows you to work with other students, teachers, staff, etc./group work) assignments/projects?

4. Explain why you do or do not enjoy working collaboratively (learning that allows you to work with other students, teachers, staff, etc./group work) with other students?

5. How does collaborative learning increase your understanding of course materials?

6. Explain how collaborative learning has helped you learn to work effectively in groups/with others?

7. What about collaborative learning is helpful training for post-educational work?

8. Are there any other comments you'd like to make or mention or add in regards to your experiences with collaborative instruction?

Combined, these data collection methods provide for triangulation in my research study. Triangulation is used throughout the process of a research study to ensure accuracy and credibility. According to Creswell (2013), triangulation takes place when the researcher makes use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence. The process of using multiple sources as outlets for data collection allows the researcher to shed light on a particular theme or perspective (Creswell, 2013). The teacher interviews, student interviews, and one administrator's interview ensures credibility of the study and its results.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for my research study consisted of organizing the data, memoing, and coding. In order to arrive at the essence of the participants' experiences, I relied heavily on Moustakas's (1994) modifications in phenomenological research. For this phenomenological study, the major findings of the phenomena were investigated and identified by way of teachers', students', and an administrator's experiences with collaborative instruction. The essences of participants' experiences were highlighted during a thorough reading of the transcribed interviews and the recorded interview notes collected during the study, as well as the development of themes and codes that support the data analysis. With each participant, I read

and reread interview notes and repeatedly listened to the audio recordings of the interviews.

Engaging in this process allowed me to become deeply immersed in the data collected. Next, I

closely examined all data to identify important and recurring patterns. Upon identifying patterns,

the data were grouped into categories that allowed the emergence of themes. Creswell (2013)

discussed theme (also known as categories) in qualitative research as "broad units of information

that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea" (p. 186). Specifically, for the

current phenomenological study, as the researcher I investigated the individual experiences and

the context of those experiences. Common themes were identified, following a coding process

which identified common themes found in the interviews.

Organizing the Data and Memoing

As Creswell (2013) suggested, responses from teacher, student, and administrator interviews

were organized by hand or computer before the data were analyzed for significant statements and

themes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for ease of the process. After I organized the

data, I hand wrote notes and memos of transcripts in the margins. These memos consisted of

short phrases, ideas, or key concepts that stood out as I read the data (Creswell, 2013). This is

called selective coding, or coding "where the researcher takes the central phenomenon and

systematically relates it to other categories, validating the relationships and filling in categories

that need further refinement and development" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) (Creswell, 2013, p.

299).

Phenomenological Reduction/Coding

Creswell (2013) suggested describing, classifying, and interpreting data so that codes or

categories can be formed, the representation of the heart of qualitative data analysis. A list of

significant statements were developed and grouped into larger units of information, also known

as "meaning units" or themes (Creswell, 2013). Codes were assigned for categories and then interview and survey data were aggregated into categories. Then, I selectively searched for recurring patterns and determined theme(s)—this process allowed me to draw conclusions, possibly supporting my own opinions, as well as the conclusions of other researchers. Codes were assigned for categories based on findings in the database and then data were aggregated into categories (See Table 3).

Trustworthiness

Creswell (2013) considered validation in qualitative research "an attempt to assess the 'accuracy' of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants" (p. 250). Gringeri, Barusch, and Cambron (2013) stated, "the researcher is expected to articulate a reasoned selection regarding the strategies that will best serve to strengthen any given study" (p. 764). In order to address the validity and reliability of the current research study, I took measures to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of this research study. Prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews, I piloted the interview questions with a sample of participants. Following the pilot, any ambiguous and confusing areas of questioning were addressed and clarified during the interview process. In order to validate the accuracy of the findings, I employed methods to increase credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Lincoln (1995) believed credibility serves as an evaluative criterion for qualitative research (As cited in Gringeri, Barusch, & Cambron, 2013). Specifically, "credibility refers to strategies and approaches that strengthen confidence in the truth value of the findings" (Gringeri, Barusch, & Cambron, 2013, p. 764). Yilamaz (2013) said, "The basic criterion to judge the credibility of data is the extent to which they allow the reader to enter the situation or setting

under study" (p. 321). To further increase the researcher's credibility in the current research study, both member checking and clarification of my biases as the researcher were employed.

Member checking. In order to accurately describe the themes of participants' experiences of and with collaborative learning, member checks were used. Creswell (2013) stated that in member checking, the researcher solicits participants' views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations. Member checking is "'the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 252). According Gringeri, Barusch, and Cambron (2013), the use of member checks supports credibility.

After I completed the interview process, I shared interview transcripts with participants and allowed them the opportunity to make corrections and/or clarifications to shared responses, similar to the way Lastica (2012) approached a phenomenological study of science teacher experiences. Lastica (2012) shared that member checking will allow researchers to verify the trustworthiness of their data and derive new understandings of participants' experiences. Participants were able to respond electronically and via paper copy regarding the accuracy of the transcripts.

Clarifying researcher bias. As the researcher, I recognize the power of collaboration. Collaboration is relevant, purposeful, effective, and invaluable. Furthermore, I am aware that collaborative learning often produces greater results than does independent work, as per the previously discussed research. My past experiences and views on collaboration add value and meaning to the study, which also works to lend credibility to this study (Creswell, 2013). Similar to Likenhoker's (2012) study, during the data collection process I bracketed out my personal experiences so that the sole focus of the study would center on the perceptions and experiences of participants as much as possible.

Dependability

Dependability refers to a method utilized in a research study that allows for its process to be audited and for the research study to be dependable (Koch, 2006). "By examining the process by which accounts are kept the auditor excludes the possibility of error or fraud" (Koch, 2006, p. 92). To increase dependability of the research study, I included thorough descriptions of the process employed for the procedures used, the data collection, and the data analysis, as well as provided the specific questions used in the semi-structured interviews.

Transferability

When research studies are evaluated, researchers often pose questions about the foundations and conclusions of the study. According to Jonsen (2009), "It is important in qualitative research to articulate explicitly how practices transform observations into results, findings and insights" (p. 124). For the current research study, triangulation of data collection was used to ensure the findings are transferable between the researcher and those being studied via the use of rich, thick descriptions (Creswell, 2013).

Triangulation. Creswell (2013) stated that when researchers locate evidence to document and code or theme in different sources of data, they provide validity to their findings. Common practice for research studies is to collect data from multiple sources. For this research study, teacher, student, and administrator interviews were used to triangulate information. "Triangulation involves using factors from different theoretical perspectives concurrently to examine the same dimension of a research problem" (Hoque, Covaleski, & Gooneratne, 2013). By interviewing students, teachers, and an administrator, I gained a deeper understanding of participants' experiences with collaborative instruction. According to Creswell (2013), the use of triangulation allows investigators to establish credibility.

Confirmability

Confirmability requires the researcher to show the way in which interpretations for inquiry have been derived. "Confirmability is established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are achieved" (Koch, 2006, p. 92). In order to ensure triangulation of data, I interviewed three different groups of participants: Teachers, students, and one administrator. Following the interviews, I transcribed the interviews and reviewed the interview transcripts. Participants were provided the opportunity to share feedback after reviewing transcripts to ensure accuracy of responses via member checking. All participants agreed upon the accuracy of the contents of the transcripts and no changes were made.

Ethical Considerations

In the current research study, I examined the perceptions of students, teachers, and an administrator regarding their experiences with collaborative instruction. Precautions were taken in my study to safeguard participants' identities. In order to protect the privacy of this study's participants, pseudonyms were used for the FRU research site and for all participants' identifiable names, in order to uphold student and school confidentiality rights. Participants were offered a consent form disclosing the purpose for the study, in addition to the ability to withdraw participation without penalty at any time. As necessary, new participants would have been solicited to fulfill the minimum number of participants.

Furthermore, participants were not pressured to respond in certain ways—grades, working relationships, and consequences did not exist nor were connected to participation in this study. Finally, to avoid infringing on teachers' and students' instructional time, interviews were conducted before and after school or during lunch periods to avoid class and work interruptions. The data were available only to me, the principal investigator. The data were stored on an

external drive with password protection. Audio recordings were locked away securely in a filing

cabinet. No one has access to data that in any way links back to participants. Once the three-year

time period has passed, all data will be erased from the external hard drive, with no data

maintained. If necessary, the external hard drive will be destroyed. Participants were not

compensated for participation in this research study. I offered participants a consent form that

disclosed the purpose for the study, in addition to the ability to withdraw participation without

penalty at any time. All IRB protocols, procedures, and policies were followed to ensure the

integrity of the study and the protection of participants' confidentiality.

Summary

A transcendental phenomenological study was conducted to gain a deeper understanding

of collaborative learning models through the perceptions and experiences of freshmen Language

Arts teachers, students, and one administrator. The purpose of this study was to use the

perceptions the participants shared in the semi-structured interviews to identify barriers that

inhibit teachers' effective implementation of collaborative learning activities into classroom

instruction. The study further sought to identify how FRU and other schools can design and

implement more relevant, effective, and personalized professional learning sessions and

mentoring programs for teachers that are based on collaborative learning models and promote

improved teacher practice and student success. Purposeful sampling was used to identify

participants for this study. Participants provided informed consent and assent. Data collection

consisted of semi-structured interviews that linked to the four guiding research questions.

Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological reduction method of data analysis was utilized to arrive at

the essences of participants' experiences. Participants' experiences were transcribed, organized,

memoed, and coded in the analysis process. Data were analyzed for themes oriented toward the

essence of participants' experiences with collaboration, specifically those that improved student success and achievement in the general education classroom setting. Processes for establishing trustworthiness were employed to ensure integrity and ethical behavior was maintained throughout the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand freshmen Language Arts teachers', students', and one administrator's perceptions of and experiences with collaborative learning models. Chapter Four presents a description of the participants and the findings for the research study. My research study focused on teachers, students, and one administrator who frequently utilized and engaged in collaborative learning instructional models within the Language Arts classroom. Through analyzing the responses received from the semi-structured interviews, my research study sought to identify effective models of instruction for teachers that could lead to the design and implementation of professional development and mentoring programs, based on collaborative learning models that promote improved teacher practice and student academic success. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews allowed me to collect data, hear the collective voices of the participants, and analyze and code the data for themes.

Four guiding research questions are addressed in this chapter and provide emergent themes for the findings of this study. The following questions guided this research study:

Research Question 1: What are freshman Language Arts students' perceptions of collaborative learning models used in teachers' instructional practices?

Research Question 2: What are freshman Language Arts teachers' perceptions of collaborative learning models used in instructional practices?

Research Question 3: What values are tied to freshman Language Arts teachers' and freshman Language Arts students' experiences with collaborative learning?

Research Question 4: What are the barriers that inhibit freshman Language Arts general education and special education teachers' ability to use collaborative learning models to meet the needs of diverse learners? How can these barriers be overcome?

Once all data were collected and analyzed, I arrived at a common description of the essence of the shared experiences of the research study's participants. Data analysis went as outlined in Chapter Three. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Participants

Collectively, 14 participants participated in the research study and shared their perceptions of and experiences with collaborative instructional learning models. All participants selected for the study had experience with collaborative instruction in the Language Arts classroom. Of the four teacher participants, two teacher participants had less than one year of teaching experience, one teacher participant had three years of teaching experience, and one teacher participant had 17 years of teaching experience. Two of the teacher participants were special education collaborative freshmen Language Arts teachers and two were general education Language Arts teachers. All teacher participants were Caucasian, a reflection of the population of teachers within the Language Arts department. One veteran administrator also participated in the study. A total of nine student participants representing the Hispanic, Caucasian, and African American populations, with a total of eight years of experience as a classroom student, participated in the research study. In order to protect the identity of all participants, realistic and culturally appropriate pseudonyms were used to replace participants' names.

Permission was obtained from the principal of FRU to collect data from participants via semi-structured interviews that were less than an hour long. Participants were given consent and assent forms to complete and return to me.

Table 1

Demographics of Teacher Participants and one Administrator Participant

Participant Name	Years of Experience	Teaching Position	General Education	Special Education
Ross	17	Ninth Grade	No	Yes
Thomas	3	Ninth Grade	Yes	No
Carrie	1	Ninth Grade	No	Yes
Adolf	1	Ninth Grade	Yes	No
Kevin	28	Administrator	Yes	No

Note. Data for participant table was taken directly from teachers and an administrator prior to the interviews.

Ross—Special Education Teacher

Ross currently serves as a special education collaborative teacher at FRU. Ross earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education from Buffalo State College, a Master of Education in Special Education from Kennesaw State University, and a Doctorate degree in Administrator Leadership for Teaching and Learning from Walden University. Ross's personal philosophy is, "You only get a few chances in life to achieve something that can never be taken from you. When that moment comes for you, rise to the challenge. You will never regret it."

To date, Ross's career as a special education teacher spans across 17 years, making him the most experienced teacher of the participants. He taught middle school for two years and the remaining 15 years of his career have been spent teaching high school across four different

schools in two different counties. Notably, Ross has a love for literature and enjoys working with Language Arts teachers. Throughout his teaching career, Ross has worked collaboratively with teachers in all of the four content areas: Math, Social Studies, Science, and Language Arts. Ross said:

> My role as a collaborative instructor varies based on the needs of the students. In some classrooms my role needs to be a little bit more intensive, and other classrooms, my role can much more general and vague, and open to interpretation based on the day and what's trying to be accomplished in the classroom. (Interview with Ross, May 2015)

Thomas—Language Arts Teacher

At the time of the interview, Thomas was approaching the end of his third year of teaching at FRU. At FRU, Thomas taught Language Arts to ninth grade students and was the only male general education teacher in the Language Arts department. Previously, Thomas taught Language Arts in a very small school in Arizona for three years. Thomas attended the University of Central Florida where he earned a Bachelor of Art degree in English Literature and later a Master of Art degree in English Education from the University of Southern California. Thomas is married and has two children, a nine-month-old son and a two-year-old daughter. Thomas's strengths are using technology in the classroom and differentiating lessons for student learners. Thomas continually looks for ways to differentiate instruction and to incorporate the use of technology into his classroom instruction. While sharing his story, Thomas said, "Teachers have to collaborate with other teachers. Your pedagogy has to evolve and you have to bounce ideas off of each other—the process of seeing what worked, what didn't work" (Interview with Thomas, May 2015).

Carrie—Special Education Teacher

Carrie attended and graduated from the largest school in the same district as FRU. Right after graduation, she attended a local university, Georgia Southern University, where she earned a degree in Special Education. During her time spent at Georgia Southern University, Carrie specifically worked with collaborative learning models in co-teaching classroom settings. Therefore, her perception of collaborative learning models focuses heavily on the co-teaching component of collaboration.

As a first-year teacher, Carrie co-teaches Language Arts with Thomas for two class periods of the day, and then teaches three resource classes for the other three periods. In the resource classes, Carrie co-teaches with an EBD (Emotional Behavior Disorder) teacher two times per day. Since this is Carrie's first year of teaching, she is interested in improving as a teacher and special education case load manager. The needs of Carrie's students are highly unique and individualized, which necessitates her frequent participation in collaborative learning models. Carrie defined collaborative learning models as "teachers working together to meet the needs of the different levels of students in the class, and working together by brainstorming ideas, and by teaching in different methods" (Interview with Carrie, May 2015). In discussion, Carrie said that current professional learning sessions at FRU do not incorporate collaboration and co-teaching frequently enough. She shared, "I think that we are lacking showing all the different ways you can effectively teach collaboratively" (Interview with Carrie, May 2015).

Adolf—Language Arts Teacher

Adolf is also native of the district in which FRU is situated. He lives in the same town as FRU and attended and graduated from the same school as Carrie, the largest high school in the district less than 20 miles north of FRU. Adolf earned a Bachelor of Science degree in English

from the University of Georgia. Currently, he is working on earning his teaching certification through an alternate preparation program available through the local school district.

For the current year, Adolf served as a first-year freshman Language Arts teacher at FRU teaching college preparatory classes. Adolf experienced challenges as a first-year teacher, primarily with maintaining high levels of student engagement. He strongly values the time he has to plan with other ninth grade teachers. Most of the ideas and information he gained was through attending the weekly course team meetings. Adolf said:

> As a first year teacher, I didn't really know what I was doing a lot of the times, so I would heavily rely on what we went over in the course team meetings and I would use a lot of that in my class. (Interview with Adolf, May 2015)

Kevin—Assistant Principal

Kevin began his career teaching in a public school in the state of Florida for five years. He has been a professional in the field of education for the last 28 years, where he has either coached, taught, supported, or lead students, teachers, and other educational stakeholders. Kevin currently serves FRU as an assistant principal who supports the Social Studies and Fine Arts departments, but has also worked as a teacher, athletic director, and principal in previous years. He has experience at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, as well as the district office. Kevin loves working with students. Daily, Kevin spends time talking and mentoring students as they arrive at school or sit in the cafeteria during lunch. He enjoys listening to students and seeing them learn and develop.

Kevin is married and has a daughter who attends a nearby large high school in the same county as FRU. Kevin supports and leads the freshman academy and the mentoring program for at-risk freshmen students. Kevin strongly believes that "all children are gifted and it's our job as

educators to help them unwrap their gifts. Educators mark the future based on how they prepare

the children of today. Education is the greatest liberator of mankind" (Interview with Kevin,

April 2016).

Table 2

Demographics of Student Participants

Participant Name	Grade	General Education	Special Education
Abi	Ninth	Yes	No
Ali	Ninth	No	Yes
Joe	Ninth	Yes	No
Kyra	Ninth	Yes	No
Liam	Ninth	Yes	No
Mary	Ninth	Yes	No
Ronald	Ninth	Yes	No
Ron	Ninth	No	Yes
Sophie	Ninth	Yes	No

Note. Data for participant table was taken directly from students prior to the interviews.

Abi—Freshman Language Arts Student

Abi is a fifteen-year-old ninth grade Caucasian female student served in a general

education classroom setting at FRU. Abi has a quiet, timid personality. When interviewing Abi,

she shared her preference to work alone so that she can exercise her independent thinking. Abi

believes that "everybody has their own way of doing things" and likes her way because she

"usually has the right way and people usually go with it" (Interview with Abi, May 2015).

However, Abi sees the benefit of working collaboratively. She shared, "You get to see other people's views…besides just your own; I think it helps more when you can get everybody else's opinions…" (Interview with Abi, May 2015).

Ali—Freshman Language Arts Student

Ali is a Caucasian female student who is served in the collaborative special education freshman Language Arts classroom setting at FRU. Ali is 14 years old, slightly younger than many of her peers. Academically, Ali works hard and tries her best to be successful in her classes. She appreciates the support of her collaborative teachers and the services she receives from the special education department. She also appreciates working collaboratively with peers in each of her scheduled classes.

Ali is an enthusiastic student with a lot of school spirit; she attends many sporting events. In her spare time, she loves watching sports and movies and playing video games on her Xbox. Ali stays active by swimming on FRU's swim team and competes frequently in competitions. She is a native of FRU's cluster and lives with both of her parents. Her mother teaches at a nearby elementary school in FRU's cluster.

Joe—Freshman Language Arts Student

Joe is an African American male freshman student served in the general education classroom setting at FRU. Like two of the other participants, he also plays on the varsity basketball team. He is 15 years old. Joe is enrolled in all college preparatory classes. Unlike his teammates, Joe struggles academically, particularly with math. Math is the one class wherein he prefers to work collaboratively with his peers since it is harder. In other classes, Joe likes to be the collaborative group leader where he is able to help other people who do not understand what to do or how to complete a task.

Based on Joe's experiences thus far at FRU, he was uncertain if he would remain there or if he would go back home with his extended family in Oklahoma. He alluded to family reasons, but did not share any specific details.

Kyra—Freshman Language Arts Student

Kyra is an African American female freshman student served in the general education classroom setting a FRU. She is 15 years old. Her family is native to the area and loves the community. Her mother works at the local post office. Neither of Kyrs'a parents received a college education. She has one little brother who is six years old and who attends an elementary school in the same cluster as FRU.

Being new to high school, Kyra takes advantage of learning opportunities where she can work with her peers. Kyra is enrolled in all college preparatory classes. Kyra is a highly social student who enjoys being with her friends and going to social events. She enjoys shopping for the latest fashions and spending time in the hair salon. She plans to attend a local technical college near FRU. Specifically, Kyra struggles with math and appreciates the opportunity to work collaboratively with her peers. Kyra prefers collaborative learning activities more than independent learning activities since she has the greatest challenges in most of her academic classes. Kyra shared that she enjoys working in groups because "some stuff that I don't know or that I need help with, they [peers] can help me figure it out" (Interview with Kyra, May 2015).

Liam—Freshman Language Arts Student

Liam is an African American male student at FRU. He is served in the general education freshman Language Arts classroom. Last month he turned 15 years old. Liam is enrolled in college preparatory courses—he and his parents take school very seriously. Liam exudes a mature persona for his age and articulates his thoughts well, though his responses were more

limited than other participants'. He lives with both of his parents in a city near FRU. His parents are very involved in his education and are connected with his teachers, coaches, and the PTA. In his spare time, Liam plays basketball, watches sports, and enjoys singing to himself. He is active on social media and is popular with his peers. In the near future, Liam plans to transfer to a nearby school in the county for reasons undisclosed.

In connection to the academic realm, Liam recognizes the benefit of working collaboratively with others because "more people should equal a better result" (Interview with Liam, May 2015). Working together with peers allows for more accuracy and detail to the work, Liam further shared. When he is working in groups, Liam considers himself a doer, not one who will take the lead unless it's warranted. He believes that he has learned to communicate better through his experiences with collaborative learning. Most importantly, as an athlete and a student, Liam values teamwork in the classroom and on the basketball court.

Mary—Freshman Language Arts Student

Mary is a 14-year-old Hispanic female student served in the general education classroom setting at FRU. She is fluent in Spanish and English. Mary lives with her mother and her mother's partner. She has attended schools in the FRU cluster ever since kindergarten. Mary has three younger siblings. She is often quiet-natured, but if she is with her friends or with people she knows well, the quiet, reserved nature disappears and Mary's outgoing, silly personality emerges. Mary is fond of spending time with her family as family is important to her. She loves to cook with her family and to watch movies. Mary also enjoys traveling, dining out at restaurants, and just having fun. In the future, she plans to attend a nearby smaller college. At school, Mary prefers to work alone instead of with peers. She said, "…I like working by myself, 'cause when I'm with a group…he [Language Arts teacher] usually puts me with the

people who don't do the work so I'm the one who ends up doing all the work" (Interview with Mary, May 2015).

Ronald—Freshman Language Arts Student

Ronald is a 15-year-old male African American freshmen student served in the general education classroom at FRU. Ronald spent his freshman year working hard in order to advance to honors/advanced-level classes. He plans to attend a four-year college with a current interest in education. Currently, he has a 3.16 grade point average. Ronald has a great personality and heavily utilizes sarcasm. He is always positive and upbeat and has great relationships with his teammates. Ronald's parents are married. His father is a correctional officer and his mother is a paraprofessional at the nearby middle school in the FRU cluster. Ronald has one younger sister who is a seventh grader at the middle school of FRU's cluster.

Ron—Freshman Language Arts Student

Ron is a 15-year-old African American male student served in the special education collaborative classroom setting. He is new to the FRU school cluster. Ron is a highly skilled and competitive basketball player who plans to attend a 4-year college after graduation, contingent upon basketball scholarship offers. His area of interest is business administration or finance, as he desires to own his own business after completing college. He has a strong relationship with his basketball coach and works hard to be successful in his classes. Ron likes working collaboratively with his peers because doing so allows him to maximize his time, finish work faster, and earn higher grades than he would when working independently.

Ron tends to be more quiet, only allowing his personality to open up after he becomes familiar with someone. His parents are divorced. Ron's father works at FRU as a teacher and

his mother is in management with UPS. Ron has four siblings, three brothers and one sister, all younger than him.

Sophie—Freshman Language Arts Student

Sophie is a fifteen-year-old female Hispanic freshmen student at FRU served in the general education setting. She is bilingual, fluent in Spanish and English. Sophie lives with her mother and is a native to the FRU area. In her interview, Sophie discussed how she does not like for others to take advantage of her, nor does she like to work with people who do not have the same work ethic as she does. Instead, she prefers to connect with her friends and the students who are like her. Sophie is one who likes to delegate and lead.

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Semi-Structured Interviews

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In order to ensure accuracy in my understanding of the essences of participants' experiences with collaborative instruction, I used an audio recorder to record teachers', students', and an administrator's interviews. During the interviews, I recorded notes on a legal pad. The memos consisted of short phrases, ideas, and key concepts that stood out as I listened to the participants' responses. All interviews were transcribed using a computer processor and then shared with participants for member checking. Participants were asked to examine my interview notes and transcriptions to check the responses for accuracy. Member checking revealed that no changes needed to be made to the transcriptions. Following member checking, I coded the transcriptions and looked for themes and correlations in participants' responses that allowed me to focus on the research questions and the essences of the participants' experiences with collaborative instruction through the lens of freshmen Language Arts teachers, students, and an administrator.

Results

The section below entails a discussion of the significant statements and themes that emerged from the data collected from the semi-structured interviews. I created a list of significant statements and recurring ideas and then reviewed the transcriptions several times to identify themes relevant to the essence of the phenomena. I focused on key information that provided answers to the research questions.

During the interview process, the use of semi-structured interview questions allowed me to glean information from the participants' experiences with collaborative learning models to understand participants' perceptions of collaborative learning opportunities. Emerging patterns became apparent throughout the data collection process.

Themes

Data collection from the 14 participants consisted of interviews. After reading the transcriptions numerous times, I noticed patterns and repeated ideas that lead to the emergence of themes that reflected participants' experiences with collaborative instruction. Following this realization, I began to record the patterns of words and phrases that repeated. During this analysis process, I grouped related words and phrases into categories (See Table 3). The categories were further synthesized and evolved into codes, categories, and themes.

The themes that emerged are as follows: (a) benefits of collaborative instruction for students and teachers, (b) challenges of collaborative instruction for students and teachers, (c) expectations of collaborative instruction for students and teachers, (d) student groupings for collaborative instruction activities, (e) student perceptions of collaborative instruction, (f) personalized professional development, and (g) co-teaching inconsistencies. These themes

provided a meaningful framework that allowed me to understand teachers', students', and an administrator's perceptions of collaborative instruction through their lived experiences.

Table 3

Words, Phrases, and Codes Derived From Data Analysis

Repeated Words/Phrases	Researcher Assigned Codes	Data Source
Completing projects/assignments	TC	SI
Earning higher grades	G	SI
Gaining people skills for jobs and college	RW	SI
Idea sharing	ID	SI
Improved social and communication skills	CS	SI
Increased and faster work production	WP	SI
Learning more organization skills	OS	SI
Learning from others	L	SI
Learning new tricks, strategies, and tips	ST	SI
Learning to balance tasks	BA	SI
Learning to be more responsible	RE	SI
Receiving more attention	AT	SI
Working together with peers and/or friends/completing group work	WT	SI

Research Question One

What are freshman Language Arts students' perceptions of collaborative learning models used in teachers' instructional practices? I designed research questions to understand the essence of student participants' experiences with the phenomena collaborative instruction within a suburban high school centered outside of a major city in central Georgia. Three themes were revealed after data were analyzed: (a) benefits, (b) challenges, and (c) expectations.

Shortly after beginning the interviews, student participants freely and easily shared their experiences with group work in Language Arts classes. All freshmen Language Arts participants were enrolled in collaboratively taught Language Arts classes. The common ground participants shared allowed participants the opportunity to form perceptions of their experiences with collaborative instruction. As participants shared collaborative learning experiences, collective patterns in the perception of the effectiveness and meaningfulness of group work emerged.

Student participants described instructional practices related to projects and tasks that were assigned in either a general education or a collaborative education setting in Language Arts classes. After I clarified what collaboration instruction learning models were, freshmen student participants began the interviews by discussing their experiences with "group work," a phrase student participants understood easily and felt comfortable discussing. For example, Ron responded, "Collaborative learning would be working together—learning from others—or learning different ways to learn the material" (Interview with Ron, May 2015). All student interview participants defined collaborative learning as group work where learning happens when working with peers and teachers in order to complete learning tasks, predominately projects.

Benefits of collaborative instruction. Throughout the interview sessions, student participants consistently discussed the theme of the benefits of working collaboratively in the Language Arts classroom. Collaborative learning activities allow the students to support, learn from, and teach one another. Working collaboratively with teachers and peers allowed students to connect with peers through more attention and support from others within the Language Arts learning environment, as well as increased exposure to others' opinions, all the while improving the students' responsibility, time management, communication, and social skills.

Kyra and Sophie appreciated the benefit of having the support and guidance of others while working collaboratively versus working independently. Kyra stated, "I get other people's opinions about what I'm doing, instead of me just doing it by myself"…"stuff that I don't know or that I need help with, they help me figure it out" (Interview with Kyra, May 2015). Sophie discussed the importance of being able to see others' views in order to avoid unproductive conflicts because she believes collaborative work allows students to be more patient and open-minded. Abi also shared Sophie and Kyra's feelings. She said, "It helps better when you like talk it out with somebody besides just doing what you think" (Interview with Abi, May 2015). Ali, Joe, and Liam saw the benefits of improving communication skills and social skills when given the opportunity to work collaboratively with others. Liam discussed how collaborative learning assignments afford students the opportunity to communicate with others in a more open way, sharing ideas, asking questions, and allowing others to support and assist with the process of completing an assignment. Sharing Liam's thoughts, Ronald stated that collaborative learning allows students to develop leadership skills. Furthermore, both Ron and Joe believed that collaborative learning helped them to earn better grades. Ron stated:

I feel like I can get work done faster. And when I'm taking a test or an exam, I remember what that person said or what that teacher said, and it helps me on the test. I like to work with other students because it maximizes time, I get work done faster, and I feel my grades are higher than when I work independently. With independent, your thought process wouldn't be as broad as if you had another person with you. Just learning and seeing it differently from the way the person is thinking. Working with other people helps you in a course with that assignment or that unit, but you can also use it throughout other classes or for another unit in that class...it makes it a lot easier and a lot more organized. (Interview with Ron, May 2015)

Another benefit uncovered in the interviews explained how students received more attention and support from Language Arts teachers, especially when both a general education and special education teacher were co-teaching in the classroom and assisting students with collaborative learning assignments.

Challenges of collaborative instruction. Although the majority of student interview participants believed collaborative instruction carried many benefits, a few of the student interview participants presented some challenges. A second theme discussed in the interviews was the belief that the benefits of collaborative instruction carries its drawbacks and does not surpass the benefits of independent work.

One drawback supporting the ineffectiveness of collaborative work focused on the lack of balance regarding group member's work ethics within collaborative groups. At times, the shared responsibility of the collaborative groups is not balanced, which allows some students to spend much of the group's class time socializing and expecting the more responsible, high achieving students with stronger work ethics to do all of the work.

Sophie shared her experiences as being the person responsible for doing all of the work for the group when assigned collaborative learning tasks because she has a strong work ethic. Sophie said, "It's like mostly I'm the one that has to do all the work" (Interview with Sophie, May 2015). Due to the lack of contributions from all of the group members Sophie has been paired with throughout the school year, she did not see any gains in benefits from working collaboratively with others in Language Arts. Sophie said, "I don't really think it benefits me." When asked if she benefitted other students when she works with them, she responded, "I know that for sure" (Interview with Sophie, May 2015). To reiterate, Sophie shared that only the non-contributing group members reap the benefits of working collaborative on assignments when she is in the group. Sophie stated, "They [group members] expect me to put their name on my paper and give them full credit for everything even though they did nothing" (Interview with Sophie, May 2015). Joe had a common response. He said, "For the most part, I enjoy it [collaborative instruction], but like sometimes like I don't enjoy it 'cause I do my part and like the other people in my group won't do their part…" (Interview with Joe, May 2015). Mary's response shared a common strand with Sophie and Joe. Both Sophie and Mary believed that collaborative groups should be chosen by the students, or at the very least, organized so that students with the same work ethic and the same range of grades are paired to work together in order to eliminate distractions that will inhibit work production. Abi believed that some students do not appreciate the opportunity to work productively in collaborative groups and only see the benefit of having more fun in class and being able to socialize more and work less. Sometimes, Abi expressed, it can be difficult for students to work together based on individual learning styles, work ethics, and each group members' level of comfort around each other.

Mary contended that students are also afforded more freedom when completing assignments requiring independent work than assignments where they are forced to solicit the approval of others.

Although Joe acknowledged the immediate benefit of collaborative instruction models in the Language Arts classroom, he believed the benefits are not long term. He stated, "…[I]n the long run, I don't think it's [collaborative instruction] helpful, because, like in college, you do things by yourself; in life, like all the time, you're not gonna have someone to do it with…" Joe continued, "Sometimes I'll do my part first and then I'll help out whoever like doesn't really know it or doesn't really want to do it; I'll help them out or do their part, or do some of it" (Interview with Joe, May 2015). Joe further discussed the pressure associated with collaborative learning assignments. According to Joe, students are not able to gain as much knowledge when completing collaborative learning assignments since the focus tends to be on completing the assignments within a specified time frame and not on learning and processing the material presented.

Student Expectations of collaborative instruction. Student interview participants shared their ideas about what teachers expect of students when collaborative work is assigned, which identified a third theme of teacher expectations of students with collaborative work. With this theme, a mix of differences were apparent between the expectations students had versus the expectations teachers had for completing collaborative learning assignments. Participants also noted the notion that teachers' grading practices for collaborative work differs from teachers' grading practices for independent work. For instance, Abi was one of the interview participants who preferred to work independently and not in collaborative learning groups. Abi believed that neither students nor teachers expect students to produce as much work when working

collaboratively on assignments, as opposed to when students complete assignments independently.

In contrast, Liam stated that collaborative work provides exactly what teachers expect: Accuracy and detail in the work produced. Specifically, Liam shared that while students may expect the entire workload to be lessened when completing collaborative assignments, the work collaborative groups produce requires "a lot more accuracy because more people should equal a better result…and it should be a lot more detailed…" (Interview with Liam, May 2015). Similarly, Reginald expressed that teachers expect more effort, more work production, and a better quality of work because there is more time allotted, along with more idea sharing and thinking happening during the process of completing collaborative work. Even though Sophie believed that students expected to be freer and to socialize more when completing collaborative work, Sophie also said, "I feel like the teacher expects us to like have a more like an open mind and grab answers from different like points of view" (Interview with Sophie, May 2015). Mary shared that teachers expects all students to participate and to do some parts of the work.

In the interview with Ron, he shared that while students expect to work, students also expect the workload for collaborative learning assignments to be easier and more manageable. Ron said, "They [students] feel, I think, they feel like it would be easier to work in a group than work alone…because you get more work done faster" (Interview with Ron, May 2015). For Kyra, working collaboratively with peers in a teacher's class lessens the expectations that all students have when working independently. She said, "It's [collaborative work] less work because you have more pressure when you're by yourself to do a good amount to work, but when you do it [collaborative work], everybody does an amount where there's not just that the pressure is just not on you" (Interview with Kyra, May 2015). Kyra noted that working collaboratively

presented the expectation from teachers and even students that all group members work equally and share the workload, therein alleviating the pressure for each group member to complete all components of an assignment independently.

Based on the changing culture of students at FRU, even with the expectation of collaborative instruction in the classroom, teachers must be attentive and even empathetic to the individual learning needs of each student. Teachers and administrators must provide students with ongoing support and attention to help them achieve the high level of expectations set before them during this time where collaborative learning activities in the Language Arts classroom are implemented and developed.

Research Question Two

What are freshman Language Arts teachers' perceptions of collaborative learning models used in instructional practices? The purpose of research question two was to understand the essence of teacher participants' experiences with the phenomena collaborative instruction within a suburban high school centered outside of a major city in central Georgia. Responses from an administrator were also included in the data. The Language Arts teachers at FRU have worked diligently to revamp classroom instruction to improve the success of all students and to provide rich, meaningful learning experiences for all student learners.

Three of the four freshmen Language Arts teacher participants, Thomas, Ross, and Carrie, co-taught in at least one collaborative Language Arts class; the remaining teacher, Adolf, taught exclusively in a general education freshmen College Preparatory Language Arts class. However, despite Adolf's lack of exposure to the co-teaching collaborative instruction model, Adolf participated in weekly collaborative planning meetings with Thomas, Ross, and Carrie. All four of the teacher participants' common experiences with collaborative instruction allowed

participants to form individual perceptions of collaborative instructional models. The

administrator participant had previous experience teaching several content areas, including

Language Arts, and currently supervises the Social Studies and Fine Arts departments.

Additionally, Kevin supports the freshmen mentoring program at FRU. Since the administrator

works closely with other administrators, teachers, and students, especially in the Language Arts

department for cross-curricular activities designed to develop a collaborative learning culture, the

responses from the administrator were included in the data analysis. The use of Kevin's

responses also brings the study full circle and allows for triangulation of data collection. As

participants shared collaborative learning experiences, collective patterns in the perception of the

effectiveness and meaningfulness of collaboration emerged.

I began the interviews by asking teacher participants to define collaborative instruction.

All four of the teacher interview participants defined collaborative instruction similarly and

agreed that collaborative instruction encompasses planning classroom instruction together each

week, with the intent of meeting the needs of all of the students in each of the freshmen

Language Arts classes.

In particular, Thomas defined collaborative instruction from both the student and teacher

perspective. Thomas said, "Collaborative learning is students working in groups together to

solve problems, or, or gain a better understanding of content" (Interview with Thomas, May

2015). From an instruction standpoint, Thomas said, "It's the teachers working together to,

basically, accomplish the same goal" (Interview with Thomas, May 2015). Adolf's response

connected two of the other teachers' responses that focused solely on teachers' collaborative

instructional planning. Adolf said that collaboration is "…working together with a group of

teachers who come together and figure out a model of how they want to teach in order to be able

to cover the correct standards" (Interview with Adolf, May 2015). Carrie responded likewise, saying "teachers working together to meet the needs of the different levels of students in the class and working together by brainstorming ideas and by teaching different methods" defines collaborative instruction (Interview with Carrie, May 2015). Ross defined collaborative instruction as "any learning environment where two or more professionals work jointly for the benefits of the students would be a…productive collaborative learning environment" (Interview with Ross, May 2015). Kevin, one of the local administrators, defined collaborative learning models simply as, "when all stakeholders are involved in the process wherein there is sharing of information," specifically using data as a guide to drive conversations between teachers (Interview with Kevin, April 2016).

Upon defining collaborative instruction, each teacher participant described the use of collaborative learning models within personal instructional practices in the Language Arts classes they teach. The responses of teachers focused primarily on projects and assignments that were assigned in either a general education or a collaborative education setting, as well as how the assignments affected students' learning. Four themes were revealed after data were analyzed: (a) benefits, (b) expectations, (c) groupings, and (d) student perceptions.

Benefits of collaborative instruction. Collectively, the teachers and the administrator shared that the use of collaborative learning models in the Language Arts classroom allowed the following major constructs to appear:

- Increases the creativity of students.

- Allows students to learn more strategies for how to work with other people.

- Teaches students how to produce work that holds merit and value.

- Increases students' content knowledge, adds variety to traditional instructional delivery models.

- Prepares students for working collaboratively in college or on jobs in a time where there are other mediums, specifically the increase in technology and the Internet, which captivate students' attention and have altered students' attention spans and attitudes towards traditional classroom instruction.

During the semi-structured interview, Kevin mentioned the impact collaborative learning activities have on minority Hispanic students according to a recently published study. Kevin said that while there is no one size fits all approach for improving students' academic performance, there are definite benefits of having individuals work collaboratively rather than independently, especially when students feel more comfortable in that kind of learning environment.

Through assigning collaborative learning assignments, Thomas witnessed the most reluctant students in class "go out on a limb and do something creative" (Interview with Thomas, May 2015). Thomas said:

 They seem to enjoy working with others…I think it impacts their learning because they're able to maybe make understanding, make meaning of something they weren't able to do on their own. And they can definitely accomplish more as a group than they would've thought possible as far as the workload goes. (Interview with Thomas, May 2015)

Sharing the same feelings, Ross viewed collaborative learning as an instructional strategy that encourages students to have more free and comfortable interactions with their peers, while also providing students with the opportunity to learn additional pieces of the curriculum.

Teachers who worked collaboratively with other teachers of the same content area noted the ability to improve classroom pedagogical practices, share ideas regarding successes and failures with lessons and/or activities, and increase their creativity in instructional planning. One of the two new first-year teachers on the freshmen Language Arts course team, Adolf, greatly appreciated being able to plan collaboratively with other freshmen Language Arts teachers on a weekly basis. Adolf heavily relied on the productivity of what took place in the collaboratively planning meetings. For Adolf, the weekly collaborative course team meetings alleviated much of the stress that came with being a brand new, first-year teacher. In addition to having more support with planning meaningful instruction, Adolf voiced that collaborative meetings allow teachers and student to be more social and to utilize real world skills in the school environment.

Teacher expectations of students with collaborative instruction. Ross expects students to be engaged throughout the collaborative process. Moreover, Ross said:

> Students have expectations based on what's consistently an expectation of the
> instructional team. If a co-taught…a collaborative pair teaches to a certain expectation, I
> don't think whether it's group work or individual work, uhh, it changes a student's, umm,
> awareness of what the expectations are. (Interview with Ross, May 2015)

In addition to what Ross shared, the administrator Kevin discussed the importance of teachers and administrators frequently checking in with students during formal and informal classroom visits, to assess their understanding of the tasks and activities assigned. Kevin stated that students must be able to clearly express their understanding of what the expectations of the task/activity set before them are in order to ensure that students comprehend the task(s) assigned. Kevin said that if students do not understand the teacher's expectations or how to complete the assignment, the opportunity for students to become unproductive and non-contributing members

of the group increases, the work production decreases, and the learning process is stifled (Interview with Kevin, April 2016). Kevin concluded that teachers must work to ensure that the expectations for all students' work during collaborative learning activities remain consistent, clear, and communicated, and that all students have defined roles and responsibilities within their groups.

Teacher perceptions of students with collaborative instruction. Thomas, Carrie, and Adolf reported that freshmen students do not seem to understand the broader implications of collaborative learning opportunities, particularly since students do not utilize classroom time wisely when collaborative learning assignments are assigned. Thomas shared that when students hear the words group assignment, "automatically they associate group work with fun…and more work. They assume there is going to be more work involved but they are going to have fun doing it" (Interview with Thomas, May 2015). Adolf discussed experiencing challenges when trying to keep students on course and fully engaged in collaborative assignments. Adolf spoke about the many times he found his students either not participating equally or participating at all and one person doing all of the work. When students are not engaged in the learning process, Adolf attempts to discourage the unproductive, non-collaborative behavior. However, Adolf is not confident that the efforts put forth truly foster active engagement and participation from all group members. Adolf said:

> I wouldn't say this happens every time, but a couple of times when we [a class] try to do
> collaborative work, there would be some students who would not be working on the
> assignment when I checked on them. I would try to steer them on course and check on
> them more frequently and make sure that they were doing the assignment. However, that
> type of assignment is supposed to something that they want to do, so part of that is error

on my part. Certain types of collaborative work can be effective. However, group work

that is not necessarily differentiated and not inter-mixed at a certain level, but is just work

where students work together, I feel that's not effective. (Interview with Adolf, May

2015)

Conversely, Ross believes when students are working in collaborative groups, they

perform at the level that is consistently expected from the teachers. Teachers have a

responsibility to ensure that students' learning needs are met and that the work assignment

requires meaningful engagement from all students. The responsibility for how students perceive

the teacher's expectations ties into whether or not students' learning needs are being met. When

students are not engaged, Ross said:

You run the risk of a lack of performance or no performance, an apathetic approach;

umm, and things of these nature really kind of deflate the learning environment, not just f

or those students, but for all the students involved. (Interview with Ross, May 2015)

Nonetheless, understanding and noting all teachers' challenges, the administrator Kevin

mentioned the need for teachers to reach out for further support, specifically to the counselors

and other teachers within the school, in an attempt to understand more clearly any underlying

causes for the students who refuse to engage in collaborative learning activities in Language Arts

classes. Kevin reiterated that teachers should not feel isolated or hopeless when students do not

respond to collaborative learning activities. Instead, Kevin suggested teachers consider the

power of people, resources, and support surrounding every teacher within FRU and find different

ways to reach students who do not see the value in collaborative learning activities. Kevin

further shared that while it may require more time, there are many strategies teachers can

incorporate into the classroom instruction that will work to empower students to be active participants in the learning process.

Student groupings for collaborative instruction. Overall, the teacher participants shared that homogenous grouping, grouping based on students' academic performance in the class, grouping based on students' interest, and grouping based on students' strengths and weaknesses are utilized in collaborative learning assignments in the Language Arts classroom. Ross, a special education collaborative teacher, specifically focuses on students' learning needs and makes adjustment to groups as needed, particularly for special education students. Ross shared, "Once you get to the point of understanding what the students' needs are in the middle of a unit, or in the middle of a lesson," differentiating within groups "holds more value in the learning environment" (Interview with Ross, May 2015). Ross continued to discuss the need for teachers to tailor collaborative instruction based on how students work with others in order to provide balance to the groups.

Research Question Three

What values are tied to freshman Language Arts teachers' and freshman Language Arts students' experiences with collaborative learning? Teachers, students, and the administrator saw the benefit of using collaborative learning models in classroom instruction.

Freshmen Language Arts teachers. Throughout the interviews, freshmen Language Arts teachers discussed the value in using collaborative learning models in classroom instruction. Collaborative course teams are extremely important to teachers at FRU, as teachers participate in weekly course team planning that strives to address the various learning needs of students.

According to Ross, collaboration has proven to be a more efficient, more effective model of instruction because collaboration brings multiple people together to accomplish one goal, allowing for a better outcome than is possible with one individual.

> In the professional world these days, collaboration has proven to be more efficient, more effective mode for whether it be any type of profession, not just education. It could be in the business world, it could be in any area, where the collaboration of multiple professionals with the same goal would have a better outcome than one individual. (Interview with Ross, May 2015)

> Ross concluded:

> Collaboration is the way people go, not just in education, but in the parts of the professional world because the pace of expectation is increased so much in the last 25 years, that you need collaborative groups to keep up with what needs to get done in a given amount of time. (Interview with Ross, May 2015)

Thomas's ideas were similar to Ross's in that students' ability to work collaboratively with other people reflects a requirement of the work place. Thomas said:

> Yeah, so much of the, like any job in the workplace, requires collaboration…you have to collaborate with others. My sister's a pharmacist and she works in an office with six other pharmacists and they have to collaborate, and if they don't, maybe a patient gets the wrong medication. You could go on and on with jobs that require collaboration and meetings, and people skills, so it's [collaboration] essential. (Interview with Thomas, May 2015)

Administrator. During the semi-structured interview, Kevin communicated the importance of teachers focusing on the individual needs of the students along with the collective

needs of the class. Kevin mentioned recent research that indicated the use of collaborative

learning in the classroom provides benefits for students, particularly minority Hispanic students,

and allows teachers to support and measure the progress of student learners more frequently.

Kevin said:

> Collaboration is good for all students. Recently, I read an article that talked about
>
> Hispanic students and collaboration. For example, when Hispanic students are attempting
>
> to acquiesce to the English language they feel more comfortable working with others and
>
> not working alone. (Interview with Kevin, April 2016)

Freshmen Language Arts students. Freshmen students discussed the values tied to

collaborative learning in connection to the benefits it will produce for the future, much of which

was noted previously in research question one. Ron shared the academic gains when students

participate in collaboration. Ron said:

> For instance, you're reading a book and if you don't understand a part of the book, you
>
> go in a group and someone else might understand that part and they'll tell you how to
>
> understand it. 'Cause when you get instruction from your peers sometimes it's better than
>
> getting it from your teachers. (Interview with Ron, May 2015)

For Sophie, working with peers allows her to see different viewpoints and perspectives while

learning how to avoid conflicts. Participant Mary said collaborative learning opportunities will

become more valuable when she attends college because, "when I get into college I can work

with a group of people like in the same area as me and can go over and study for a test"

(Interview with Mary, May 2015). Kyra thought about the post-secondary world and talked

about the value of being exposed to collaborative learning activities in preparation for the future

in the workplace and/or college:

When you get a job you're more than likely going to have co-workers, so you're going to

have to learn to talk to people and have social skills. When you're working in a group

you have to learn how to talk to people the right way and balance each other out.

(Interview with Kyra, May 2015)

To reiterate, for the student participants, collaborative learning assignments encouraged

students to communicate more openly, share ideas, support one another, develop new and refine

existing leadership skills, gain new knowledge, and improve grades.

Research Question Four

What are the barriers that inhibit freshman Language Arts general education and special

education teachers' ability to use collaborative learning models to meet the needs of diverse

learners? How can these barriers be overcome? The purpose of research question four was to

evaluate what general education and special education freshmen Language Arts teachers

perceived to be the obstacles that inhibit the effective use of collaborative learning models in

classroom instruction. During the course of the interviews, teacher participants discussed the

struggles of implementing collaborative learning activities into classroom instruction. All four

teacher participants voiced the need for professional development sessions that focused on how

to utilize collaborative learning in classroom instruction effectively, along with the need for more

attention to pairing co-teachers in order to be more successful as classroom teachers. When

discussing challenges, the four participants continued to refer to the difficulty of differentiating

collaborative learning activities effectively with student groups, as well as being able to plan

consistent, effective instruction with co-teachers without enough time. Two themes were

identified after an analysis of the data: (a) personalized professional development and (b) co-

teacher inconsistencies.

Personalized professional development. Throughout the school year, teachers participate in numerous professional development sessions that expose teachers to different instructional strategies that they can implement into their classroom instruction to improve student academic success, as well as to set norms for course team planning. Teacher participants stated the need for all teachers to be provided with more effective instructional tools in order to continue improving the work created in course teams.

However, Thomas believed teachers need more professional learning opportunities that focus on best practices for how to function as a collaborative co-teacher, as well as how improve student productivity and contributions while working in collaborative groups. Thomas shared, "There may be some better professional development, some advice on what the workload should look like, how independent students should be when they're working collaboratively" (Interview with Thomas, May 2015). Ross, too, suggested more professional development where co-teachers are the presenters of professional learning sessions that solely focus on collaborative co-teaching, instead of "a series of administrators or county office-level personnel" who are not connected to the classroom daily (Interview with Ross, May 2015).

Kevin supported Thomas's general ideas and said that teachers need to serve as mentors and provide guidance to novice and seasoned teachers alike, since teachers as a whole often do not feel as threatened working with other teachers in comparison to teachers who work with administrators. Kevin believed that some aspects of teaching would be best improved through peer-to-peer interactions; such interactions would eliminate teachers' inhibition in expressing ideas, questions, and challenges when working with an administrator. In terms of collaborative learning models, Kevin said, "They [schools] have to provide examples and models of what is

perceived as highly effective teaching models" (Interview with Kevin, April 2016). Kevin

continued:

> Schools have to find ways to bring that and make it palatable and give opportunities for
>
> teachers to be able to visit schools that have highly effective models because if you can
>
> see it, touch it, then you can believe it, but if you can't see it, then, you know, it's harder
>
> to believe. (Interview with Kevin, April 2016)

Kevin concluded that teachers need to see and/or be exposed to models that would benefit

teachers more and create loyalty for collaboration models. Kevin shared that at FRU, the

leadership team is still working to define and create a framework regarding what great

collaboration looks like—completion of the collaborative learning framework will increase

teacher and school-wide effectiveness, making the use of collaborative learning models greater.

Ross also detailed why collaborative co-teachers need to spend unguided time together

freely and openly discussing each other's expectations, without the constraints of fulfilling the

protocols, procedures, and expectations of local school and administrative teams; therefore,

collaborative co-teachers would be empowered to determine the best way to utilize each

teacher's strength in order to meet the needs of student learners. Ross also felt that novice

teachers, teachers with less than three years of teaching experience, should not be assigned to co-

teach in a collaborative setting.

Co-Teacher inconsistencies. While Thomas spends time planning for assignments for

his five classes, co-teaching with different co-teachers presents challenges. Thomas shared:

> I don't really enjoy teaching collaboratively with another person in the room…I have two
>
> different people come in two different periods, both of which I'm good friends with, but
>
> it kind of messes up the flow of my lessons, having another person in there; it's kind of

awkward. But if I had one person come in for multiple periods, I think that would be different. (Interview with Thomas, May 2015)

Carrie, a first-year special education collaborative Language Arts teacher, responded similarly to Thomas. Carrie shared that co-teaching with two different Language Arts teachers limits the ability to adjust the delivery and structure of collaborative learning activities, since doing so would require more time to plan, aside from the time it takes to plan instruction for the Language Arts resource classes she teaches. According to Carrie, the time spent planning for co-taught classes outside of the Language Arts collaborative meetings is very limited. Instead, Carrie shares roles with the general education co-teacher and ultimately follows the lead of the general education teacher and tries to make adjustments to instruction while in the co-teaching environment.

Thomas continued and shared one possible solution that may eradicate the barriers that inhibit general education and special education co-teachers from working together to meet the needs of student learners and improve collaborative co-teaching. Thomas said:

Having one teacher for multiple periods and being able to plan and go through the lessons multiple times together rather than just me doing it three times and then all of a sudden there is somebody else in the room once I've figured out all the bugs. Being able to kinda figure out that stuff together so maybe we can plan accommodations for sped students a little bit more or any students that struggle for that matter, to having multiple ideas for accommodations or helping struggling students, I think that would be much more beneficial. (Interview with Thomas, May 2015)

Summary

Chapter Four reported freshmen student and teacher participants' lived experiences with collaborative instruction in the Language Arts classroom, specifically, participants' perceptions of the phenomena. Through semi-structured interviews, the 14 participants shared perceptions of collaborative instruction based on experiences gained in the Language Arts classroom over the course of a school year.

Teachers, students, and an administrator shared both the positives and the struggles encountered with this phenomenon, in an effort to improve the school's overall academic success rate, specifically, in freshmen Language Arts classrooms. Collaborative instructional structures that guided the collaborative learning models and helped to improve students' success in freshmen Language Arts classes were discussed. An analysis of the data revealed several themes: (a) benefits (students and teachers), (b) challenges (students and teachers), (c) expectations (students and teachers), (d) groupings, (e) student perceptions, (f) personalized professional development, and (g) co-teaching inconsistencies. To ensure accuracy of themes, member checking was used. I reviewed the interview transcripts to pinpoint themes and determine associations. Finally, the perceived effectiveness of collaborative instructional models was reported.

I reviewed the data related to all four research questions. For research question one, the theme of the benefits of collaborative instruction was identified based on participants' responses during the semi-structured interviews. Several participants noted the benefits of working collaboratively with peers in the learning environment. The benefits discussed were the ability of students to increase open, free communication with peers, to provide each other with support during the learning process, to increase knowledge gained, and to improve overall grades.

While participants discussed the benefits of having experiences with collaborative learning assignments, a second major theme easily emerged, which called attention to the drawbacks of collaborative instruction. A main drawback shared by students was the imbalance of student roles in collaborative learning groups, along with the differences in student work ethic and student contributions to the work of the group.

A third and final theme for question one emerged, which referenced teachers' expectations of students when students are working in collaborative learning groups. Students commented feeling that teachers expect all students to participate, contribute, engage, and benefit from the learning that takes place with collaborative learning activities. Despite the expectations of the Language Arts teachers, some of the student participants' comments alluded to the lack of expectations students have when assigned to groups to complete collaborative work. The student participants who saw an imbalance in the groups believed that collaborative groups needed to be more balanced relative to student work ethic, academic performance, and/or individual preference.

In addition to the themes presented for the students in research question one, research question two focused on freshmen Language Arts teachers. The themes for freshmen Language Arts teachers related directly to the themes discussed by the freshmen Language Arts students: How teachers perceived the benefits of collaborative instruction for themselves, other teachers, and students, the drawbacks of collaborative instruction for teachers and students in the general education and special education freshmen Language Arts classrooms, and the expectations of teachers and students with collaborative work.

Research question three unveiled the values both students and teachers tied to collaborative instruction. All four teachers attributed a vast amount of the teachers' success

within the freshman Language Arts course team to the collaborative planning that takes place on a weekly basis within the department. Teachers explained that planning together and discussing the academic needs of the students in the ninth grade allowed teachers to open up and venture beyond traditional classroom instructional models in order to learn new ideas and feel more comfortable and confident with teaching the ever-changing diverse pool of student learners in the classroom. Teachers valued the opportunity to work with other professionals to share ideas, develop new instructional lessons, utilize instructional strategies, and support each other and the students in acquiring skills that will benefit the students when they graduate high school and enter either into college or the workforce.

Furthermore, students particularly valued the support of teachers and peers, the communication between teachers and peers, and the opportunity to work with others collaboratively and meaningfully. Students believed collaborative learning opportunities would be beneficial not only in other academic classes, but also beyond high school graduation.

Finally, research question four uncovered barriers teachers felt inhibited the effective implementation of collaborative instruction into the Language Arts classroom. Two final themes surfaced: The need for more personalized professional development and the need to eliminate co-teaching teacher inconsistencies. One theme centered on the need for more personalized professional development offerings at the local school that solely focus on providing teachers with specific strategies to use for implementing collaborative learning activities into freshmen Language Arts classroom instruction. While teachers work closely to plan instruction to meet the needs of student learners, teachers need more explicit guidance from professional development structures, such as administrators, to assist with planning, making improvements, and meeting the needs of current learners. Another theme developed as teachers noted a need for

more professional development that demonstrated how to effectively engage all students in the learning process equally within collaborative instructional models. As far as co-teaching was concerned, more attention devoted to the pairing of co-teachers, the schedules assigned to co-teachers, and the time allotted for planning could all improve the efficiency and effectiveness of co-teaching collaborative models.

A summary of the findings will be presented in the next chapter, along with a discussion of the themes as they relate to the theoretical frameworks of the study: Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivism theory and Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive theory. Additionally, a discussion of the implications of the study, limitations, and recommendations for future research will be discussed.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to investigate teachers', students', and one administrator's perceptions of collaborative instruction at a suburban high school outside of a major city in central Georgia. The study sought to determine how to encourage a suburban high school to utilize and implement effective collaborative learning models into classroom instruction, as well as how to provide professional learning models that support teachers' growth and teacher effect. The foundation for my study came from understanding the perceptions and experiences of teachers, students, and one administrator. This study focused on how teachers can implement effective collaborative instructional models into classroom instruction that meet the learning needs of diverse student learners.

Collaborative learning models have the potential to narrow achievement gaps in schools and increase student achievement (Cabrera, 2010). Previously, Reardon (2013) and Futrell (2011) warned educators about the importance of improving teaching strategies and revising classroom instruction in order to overcome academic and equity disparities between students and schools. Genao (2014) emphasized Reardon's (2013) and Futrell's (2011) warnings by calling attention to how the educational system in America has yet to reform in a manner that allows students to compete on international levels. Students are competing internationally and are no longer expected to compete locally or even nationally. Likewise, Futrell (2011) alluded to teachers, schools, and administrators all being measured by students' performances on international levels and not just locally or nationally. Findings from Baccellieri (2010) showed there was no one solution to eliminate all inequalities and disparities between students in

education, but the move towards the effective use of collaborative instruction in the Language

Arts classroom proves to be a step in the right direction.

Thus, the information gained from the teachers', students', and an administrator's

responses during this research study may benefit other teachers, students, and more importantly,

schools that are struggling to support and implement effective collaborative learning models into

the curriculum. Implementing effective collaborative learning models into classroom instruction

will help to ensure that all students are successful in their academics and are able to reach full

academic potential. All stakeholders in the educational realm must ensure a positive and

effective learning atmosphere that will strengthen students' learning experiences and increase

students' knowledge, skills, and ability to work efficiently in all arenas.

The following research questions guided this study:

> **Research Question 1:** What are freshman Language Arts students' perceptions of
> collaborative learning models used in teachers' instructional practices?
>
> **Research Question 2:** What are freshman Language Arts teachers' perceptions of
> collaborative learning models used in instructional practices?
>
> **Research Question 3:** What values are tied to freshman Language Arts teachers' and
> freshman Language Arts students' experiences with collaborative learning?
>
> **Research Question 4:** What are the barriers that inhibit freshman Language Arts
> general education and special education teachers' ability to use collaborative learning
> models to meet the needs of diverse learners? How can these barriers be overcome?

Data gathered from semi-structured interviews with teacher and student participants

answered the four guiding research questions, which centered on participants' lived experiences

with and perceptions of collaborative learning models. Participant interviews were transcribed

and then analyzed. Data analysis uncovered significant statements that allowed me to identify themes. In Chapter Four, the themes of the data analysis were reported in detail. The narrative in Chapter Four discussed the participants' lived experiences with the phenomenon collaborative instruction.

Chapter Five presents a brief summary of the findings related to the four research questions, followed by a discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks and the relevant literature review. Additionally, the implications of the study, the limitations and delimitations of the study, and the recommendations for future research are detailed.

Summary of the Findings

An analysis of the data identified several themes that directly related to the academic needs of freshmen Language Arts student learners and teachers and collaborative instructional models: (a) benefits (freshmen Language Arts students and teachers), (b) challenges (freshmen Language Arts students and teachers), (c) expectations (freshmen Language Arts students and teachers), (d) groupings, (e) student perceptions, (f) personalized professional development, and (g) co-teaching inconsistencies.

The first research question attempted to understand freshman Language Arts students' perceptions of collaborative learning models as used in teachers' instructional practices in the Language Arts classroom. Analysis of the data showed the emergence of three themes: the (a) benefits, (b) challenges, and (c) expectations of collaborative instruction within the Language Arts classroom. Throughout students' interviews, the data revealed that collaborative instruction extended several benefits for students academically, socially, and personally. Participants shared that collaborative learning allows students to learn from one another, teach and share ideas with one another, support one another, and connect to one another all while improving responsibility,

time management, and communication skills. However, student responses during interviews also called attention to how the benefits of collaborative learning opportunities can quickly become overshadowed when teachers create imbalanced, inequitable group pairings and when students who are apathetic and do not possess a work ethic are assigned to groups. Four of the student participants shared that being assigned to work in groups with students who have little to no work ethic or who do not share the same level of intelligibility as others in the group creates a burden on the group members who are willing to work and who possess a strong work ethic. A discussion of the expectations of collaborative work from the student perspective was also explored.

Research question two asked what are freshman Language Arts teachers' perceptions of collaborative learning models used in instructional practices? The second research question focused on understanding freshman teachers' perceptions of collaborative learning models used in instructional practices. Data analysis revealed four themes: (a) benefits, (b) expectations, (c) groupings, and (d) student perceptions of collaborative instruction within the Language Arts classroom. During the interviews, teachers Adolf, Tom, and Ross discussed how FRU had established a culture of collaboration among the Language Arts teachers and students.

In general, teacher participants expressed having an appreciation for the collaborative instructional models used within course teams and the classrooms. Teachers said that utilizing collaborative learning activities in classroom instruction increased students' creativity, productivity, and intelligibility. For teachers, the benefit of working collaboratively with other teachers allowed them to improve and incorporate more creativity into pedagogical practices and instructional planning. Regarding the expectations of student collaborative work and student groupings, teacher participants discussed the importance of tailoring instruction to ensure that it

is meaningful and engaging for all students. Teachers also talked about the importance of consistently clear expectations for all collaborative work assigned to students. Teachers also saw the need to pay close attention to how students work with other students in order to create and maintain balanced group pairings.

Research question three sought to identify what values are tied to freshman Language Arts teachers' and freshman Language Arts students' experiences with collaborative learning. Having a culture of collaboration at FRU allows both students and teachers to learn from one another. For students, a culture of collaboration allows them to have broader, deeper, more exploratory classroom learning experiences. For teachers, the culture of collaboration allows them to adjust and improve instructional practices.

The final research question focused on identifying the barriers that inhibit freshman Language Arts general education and special education teachers' ability to use collaborative learning models to meet the needs of diverse learners, as well as how to overcome these barriers. Research question four specifically asked: What are the barriers that inhibit freshman Language Arts general education and special education teachers' ability to use collaborative learning models to meet the needs of diverse learners? How can these barriers be overcome? Teachers need personalized professional learning and support with co-teaching pairings in order to utilize collaborative learning models more effectively.

Discussion and Implications Related to the Theoretical Framework

Contained in this section is a presentation of the theoretical frameworks which supported understanding the implications of the current research study.

Vygotsky's (1978) and Bandura's (1986) theories provided the theoretical frameworks used to support this research study. The use of both Vygotsky's (1978) and Bandura's (1986)

theoretical frameworks highlighted the implications associated with teachers' ability to improve the academic success of students by way of understanding the perceptions and experiences of freshmen Language Arts teachers and students in connection to collaborative instruction. Further discussion will provide details regarding the connection between the findings of the data collected during the semi-structured interviews and the two theories.

Vygotsky's Social Constructivism Theory

Through ongoing observations and studies, Vygotsky (1978) revealed the processes through which learning and development occur within individuals. Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivist theory centers heavily on the role an individual's environment and social interaction plays on learning. Vygotsky (1978) argued that when individuals can work with other individuals, learning is heightened and problem solving skills are developed—such learning stems from the Zone of Proximal Development. Social Constructivist theory marries the social and cognitive constructs on how fellow students in the classroom help peers learn more effectively by offering other perspectives and experiences (DeCosta, Clifton, & Roen, 2010).

More and more at FRU, collaborative learning activities are being utilized in the freshmen Language Arts classroom. Previously, Shabari, Khatib, and Ebadi (2010) described two ways student learners develop and advance to the next attainable level via environmental tools and peer interactions while in the Zone of Proximal Development. Teacher participants discussed the heavy focus and amount of time spent devising engaging collaborative lessons that support the learning needs of all student learners. With collaborative assignments, students can work together, share ideas, and learn from each other through a social learning process. Not only do the teacher participants create engaging, collaborative learning activities, but the teacher

participants also devote careful consideration to creating collaborative learning groups that will create a supportive culture of teaching and learning and address students' individual learning needs. In order to develop a healthy social culture, the teacher participants try to ensure that the freshmen Language Arts students are paired with individuals who will complement their strengths, develop their skills, awareness, and learning, challenge their growth, and expose them to newer and more innovative ideas. In the semi-structured interviews, several student participants shared personal experiences where working collaboratively with peers in the Language Arts classroom produced several notable academic and social benefits. Students saw the connection between working collaboratively with their peers and their futures in college and the workforce. A few of the student participants even noted an increase in their grades when engaged in collaborative learning activities.

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive theory focuses on observational learning wherein people engage in activities that are comprised of personal interactions and observations. Particularly, Social Learning theory assumes that modeling influences produce learning. Bandura's (1986) Social Learning theory "assumes that modeling influences produce learning principally through their informative functions and that observers acquire mainly symbolic representations of modeled activities" (p. 6). A further premise of this theory centers on the purpose found when individuals engage in meaningful activities and receive feedback from other individuals while engaging in activities, thus promoting increased learning and social interactions. Bandura (1986) stated that social learning serves as a reciprocal influence process between behavior and controlling conditions, where both individual and environmental

determinants fuse. In the social learning process, new patterns of behavior can be acquired through direct experience or by observations of others' behavior.

Freshmen students often face difficulties and challenges upon entering high school. While in middle or junior high school, students participate in a very structured, team-oriented curriculum. Once freshmen students move to high school the buildings become much larger and more divided, typically by departments (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). In high school, the expectations, requirements, and demands of the curriculum are often more rigorous than those of elementary and middle school, simply due to the increased accountability measures for both teachers and students. High school students are faced with high stakes accountability measures such as the Milestones End of Course assessments, midterms, final exams, PSATs, and college entrance exams. Demands such as these necessitate that high school students gain the support of teachers and peers. Specifically, freshmen Language Arts students need to be provided with opportunities to have productive social interactions with other students. Incorporating collaborative learning activities into the freshmen Language Arts classroom allows freshmen students the opportunity to learn from each other and gain additional support during the learning process.

Teachers at FRU have recognized a shift in how the current generation of students think, work, and act, which encourages them to work diligently to develop a collaborative culture that supports all students' diverse learning needs. Teachers at FRU understand the importance of crafting instruction and a culture of learning for students that promotes higher level thinking and requires skill application to real world problems.

Discussion and Implications Related to the Literature

The literature review connected to themes that were identified during the data analysis of

the teacher and student participants' responses. The four themes were: (a) benefits of

collaborative instruction for freshmen Language Arts teachers and students, (b) challenges

regarding the implementation of collaborative instruction into the freshmen Language Arts

classroom, (c) expectations of collaborative instruction, and (d) role of administrators in

providing personalized professional development for teachers which focuses on best practices for

utilizing collaborative learning in the classroom. The teacher and student participants addressed

the four themes during the semi-structured interviews. The section below provides a description

of how the themes identified during the data analysis support the themes identified in the

literature review.

Benefits of Collaborative Instruction for Freshmen Language Arts Teachers and Students

The semi-structured interviews revealed the benefits of collaborative instruction via the

perceptions of students and teachers. Making use of collaborative learning activities in the

classroom is significant due to changes in diversity and the popularity of technological advances

(Black, 2010). Furthermore, both Zhu (2012) and Black (2010) shared that teachers must alter

classroom instruction to meet the needs of the ever-diverse student population and to increase

students' performance in the learning environment. Student participant interviews revealed that

the majority of students at FRU were more interested in classroom learning activities that

allowed them to communicate and socialize with peers as well as engage in the learning process,

as opposed to listening to lengthy lectures in a disengaged state. Ninth grade Language Arts

teacher Thomas believed that students enjoy collaborative learning because it enhances their

understanding of material and allows students them to make meaning of the academic material more than would be possible if they worked independently (Interview with Thomas, May 2015).

All four of the teacher participants at FRU frequently utilize collaborative learning activities in the classroom and differentiate the lessons often. Tolmie et al. (2010) acknowledged the power collaborative learning activities provide to social dynamics, as noted in the teacher and student interviews. Teacher Ross discussed how collaborative learning provides quality instruction that promotes the learning and improved academic and social success of freshmen students. For Sophie, not having the opportunity to work collaboratively in other subject areas such as science and social studies presented a disadvantage, unlike the advantage of working collaboratively in the Language Arts classroom. Regarding World Geography, Sophie stated, "We normally just get our notes and that's it" (Interview with Sophie, May 2015). The use of collaborative learning activities aligns with the foundations of collaborative learning by benefitting and allowing students to develop an increased level of confidence in knowing that they can learn from peers and utilize individual strengths, as well as develop lesser strengths.

Challenges of Implementing Collaborative Instruction into the Classroom

The literature review specifically discussed partner placements and student diversity as two components that presented challenges for teachers who implement collaborative instruction into classroom instruction. A few student participants freely discussed their frustrations when working collaboratively in groups. For some students, collaborative learning activities do not promote shared responsibility or provide balance for all students. In particular, Sophie, Joe, Mary, and Abi recalled times where their group members would spend the allotted work time socializing and relying on the work ethic and work production of higher-achieving students and would not contribute to the group's progress. These participants believed that more

consideration should be given to the formation of collaborative learning groups in order to maximize work production and provide all students with equal learning and growth opportunities.

In his interview, Joe shared a different challenge he encountered with collaborative learning activities. He said that when he is working collaboratively, he is simply focused on the urgency of task completion and not on learning (Interview with Joe, May 2015). Taking Joe's experiences into consideration, teachers must be cognizant of and clearly communicate and stress the importance of each collaborative learning activity's learning goals.

Similar to student responses, teacher participants also discussed how students tend to be more social during collaborative learning activities and often do not seem to focus as much or share the workload evenly. According to Cen, Ruta, Powell, Hirsch, and Ng (2016), "to maximize the effectiveness of collaborative learning, the need for students to be trained handling issues and for teachers to be guided in training students on how to conduct group work" must be present (p. 192). Cen et al. (2016) further said:

> In collaborative learning, the learning behavior of students working collaboratively is more complicated than that of individual learning (Hackman and Morris, 1975). The performance of a group is not decided by individual learners, but is a complex combination of all learners' contributions to the group. Assessment and prediction of group performance can help to evaluate and improve a collaborative learning system, identify productive grouping and interaction patterns, and help to understand what drives student academic performance within a dynamic and connected learning environment. As mentioned before, both the characteristics of individual students and their interaction patterns can influence the performance of group learning, which makes performance

assessment and prediction in collaborative learning much more challenging compared to individual learning. (p. 194)

Gardiner (2010) stressed the need for teachers to invest meaningful time into creating partner pairings, to clearly define the roles of each student, and to communicate and consistently provide feedback and support to students during the learning process. All in all, limiting the amount of off-task socialization, dismissing the perception that collaborative learning activities require more or less work of students, balancing the workload, and assembling strong partner pairings were a few of the challenges teacher participants noted they face when utilizing collaborative learning activities in their classroom.

The administrator Kevin addressed a different challenge in which the teachers at FRU had not mentioned in the interviews. Kevin believed the teachers needed to be provided with more time to plan and prepare highly effective collaborative learning activities that would elevate students' learning experiences.

Teacher and Student Expectations of Collaborative Instruction

For some students, completing collaborative learning activities is a matter of relying on the student(s) with the strongest work ethic in the group in order to receive the best grade possible; for other students, collaborative learning provides students with the opportunity to learn new ideas, knowledge, and skills that would have otherwise been unthinkable. Some student participants felt that collaborative work required all student to do more and work harder. For instance, Ding and Harskamp (2011) discussed teachers' use of ability grouping and labor balance as a drawback of collaborative learning, wherein one or more student participants "shoulder less than their fair share of responsibility or contribute less to a group endeavor in collaborative work"(Ding & Harskamp, 2011, p. 843). Ding and Harskamp (2011) continued,

"The free rider effect and the sucker effect are frequently found in this [teachers' use of ability grouping and labor balance] practice" (p. 843). Furthermore, teachers expressed the hope that students would share the workload equally and accomplish a much more meaningful task, even real-world oriented, when paired with other students for collaborative learning assignments.

Teachers saw the use of collaborative learning activities as a way to engage students in higher levels of thinking and accomplish more learning goals. In essence, teachers must consistently model and communicate their expectations of collaborative work to students. Ding and Harskamp (2011) concluded, "Collaboration without explicit guidance may turn into nonsense talk partly because students are less knowledgeable about how to set goals and how to choose strategies to achieve these goals" (p.844). Without proper guidance, attention, and support, students may not always produce at a level that is expected and may not carry an awareness of how to stay on task and use their class time wisely. "If teachers believe they provide constructive feedback and communicate goals clearly but students do not recognize this, they are not likely to react to the support and its effectiveness in shaping student learning is diminished" (Pat-EL, Tillema, Segers, & Vedder, 2015, p. 284).

Role of Administrators in Providing Meaningful Professional Learning for Teachers

Effective school leaders—administrators, teacher leaders, department chairs, and instructional coaches—influence the culture of a school, specifically the way in which teaching and learning take place. Leadership evokes collaboration and concerted action among diverse and often competing groups towards a shared outcome (Soribel, 2014). Cranston (2011) examined the need for relational trust between teachers and administrators in order for a culture of collaboration to exist. Both Thomas and Ross felt there is a need for administrative leaders at FRU to create individualized professional learning for teachers that would communicate specific

ways to expand their ability to work and collaborate with other teachers to increase student achievement. Thomas observed that with most professional learning opportunities, people "just go through the motions, as in 'oh, this is something we have to do'…" or they become tasks to be completed, meaningless requirements (Interview with Thomas, May 2015). In general, the teacher participants felt that professional learning that truly meets the needs of teachers is absent in schools, and only the looming requirement for teachers to participate in professional learning sessions of any kind remains present, a mere hoop to jump through that proves meaningless.

While teachers at FRU understand the necessity of trusting the guidance of the administrators and other teachers in the school, the teacher participants interviewed felt it most important to have personalized professional learning provided for them that offered specific, effective strategies for reaching the diverse population of students within freshmen Language Arts classes. The teachers wanted administrators to listen to their challenges, collaborate with them, identify with their needs as teachers, and genuinely provide them with effective strategies for meeting the needs of their student learners. Kevin agreed with teachers and understood the need to present teachers with tangible, effective models of collaborative instruction to use as a guide to improve classroom instructional practices. Kevin hopes to allocate people and resources that will support teachers and further build their teacher capacity. Soribel (2014) shared, "Research on collaboration, particularly for public purposes, is very consistent in recognizing the significant role of leadership in the success or failure of collaborative endeavors" (p. 445). Through the semi-structured interviews, it became apparent that the teachers at FRU not only cared about their students' learning, but also genuinely wanted to pave a path of success for them beyond the confines of high school.

Teachers need more guidance, not just support, and leaders who will collaborate with them and be open and receptive to their needs and challenges. Kevin believed that teachers connecting with other teachers offered the greatest support, mentorship, and source of resources and innovative ideas. As noted previously, Kevin believed that teachers need the interaction and guidance from teachers with whom they can relate. Cranston's (2011) ideas supported those of the teacher participants' by insisting that leaders must form and nurture relationships with other teachers. Leaders who build strong relationships with teachers allow teachers to engage in discussions that delve beneath surface issues and express truths about the challenges and needs they face in the classroom, in order to support them in fostering student achievement at high levels.

Limitations

A few limitations existed in the current research study. First, the sample size of 14 participants was small and did not include the perceptions of a Language Arts department administrator; instead, the perceptions of an administrator at FRU who supports the Social Studies and Fine Arts departments was included. Despite the sample size being acceptable for a phenomenological research study, the select number of participants may have provided a limited view of teachers', students', and an administrator's experiences with collaborative instructional models at Falcons Rise Up High School (pseudonym).

A second limitation was the grade level of student participants. Only students enrolled in freshmen Language Arts classes were selected for participation in the research study, along with teachers of freshmen Language Arts courses. Student participants reflected general education and special education collaborative taught students—no English Language Learners (ELL) were selected for participation in the research study. Additionally, no other content areas outside of

Language Arts within FRU were selected for the current study. A final point of consideration focuses on the teacher participants. While all of the teacher participants held varying degrees of teaching experience and educational background, three of the four participants were male teachers and all of the participants represented one racial ethnicity. Due to the limited participants and diversity of participants, the perceptions of teachers in other content areas and grade levels were not determined.

A final limitation of the research study was the timeframe for conducting interviews. Once I received IRB approval, there was only a week and a half timeframe in which I could interview participants due to the spring semester ending and students' and teachers' heavy involvement in final exams and end of the year testing and academic responsibilities. Several students' and teachers' normal schedules were interrupted during this time. Due to the condensed time frame and span of undertakings in May, some of the participants' responses might not have been as detailed and comprehensive.

Recommendations for Future Research

The phenomenon explored in this research study was freshmen Language Arts teachers', students', and one administrator's perceptions of and experiences with collaborative instruction. Through understanding participants' perceptions and experiences, the research study sought to highlight ways to improve a school's collaborative culture with a laser focus on improving students' academic success rates through heightened student engagement and meaningful and relevant classroom instruction. Due to an increase in students' diverse learning needs, increased use of technology and technology programs, and a cultural shift in the way schools and businesses operate, students need healthy and meaningful collaborative learning experiences that will provide the knowledge and skills necessary for success in high school, college, and the

world beyond. General education and special education teachers continue to have increased accountability to students, parents, schools, and communities. More and more, teachers must provide all students with effective, high-quality instruction and elevate students' growth in learning and performance, primarily on local, district, state, and/or national assessments. Gleaning information from teacher, student, and one administrator's semi-structured interviews provides opportunities for FRU and other schools to identify the barriers that inhibit productive collaborative instruction within course teams and classrooms, and also allows schools to find ways to improve collaborative communities.

Based on the findings of my research study, future research should be considered in larger schools to continue the process of reforming schools through highly engaging collaborative learning models. Since FRU is the second smallest high school in its district, one area of future research would be to determine how other high schools, especially with higher student enrollment counts and greater levels of student and teacher diversity, could improve the quality of students' learning experiences and increase student achievement rates. Particularly, more attention should be given to special education and general education students' learning regarding the support and design of collaborative instructional models and teams.

Responses from teacher interviews highlighted a need for further attention and research in designing professional learning opportunities that support the effective implementation of collaborative learning models for novice and seasoned teachers. Schools and districts need to provide support for teachers by providing more professional learning opportunities and mentoring programs that will support teacher growth in a collaborative community. Teachers also need continued opportunities to expand the repertoire of teaching strategies that will meet the diverse learning needs of the current generation. Research on how to support teachers in

overcoming the inequalities and issues between collaborative and general education teachers in the classroom should also be considered.

With increased accountability measures in high schools as measured by local, state, and national assessments and a need to improve student pass rates and graduation rates, an additional recommendation is for future research to identify the components of effective professional learning sessions in the school setting, as well as how the effective professional learning sessions support teachers' instructional growth. Conducting research as such may lend to a discussion about how schools can provide specific professional learning for teachers that will support teachers in improving the passing and graduation rates of students. To further support this recommendation, an investigation of one or more schools wherein there is evidence of the use of effective collaborative instructional models resulting in higher student achievement rates and graduation rates could provide insights for how schools such as FRU could make use of effective collaborative models that will promote increased student success.

A final area of research could be exploring the perceptions and experiences of teachers, students, and administrators in other core content areas and grade levels. For the current research study, only the perceptions and experiences of freshmen College Preparatory Language Arts teachers and students were investigated, along with one administrator.

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

The need for schools to evolve into *changing schools* by building a culture of collaboration adds value to teachers' instruction and students' academic learning experiences. Montgomery and Hirth (2011) discussed the primary mission of educators: "To help young people move into adulthood with the skills necessary to be successful members of society" (p.11). Students must be exposed to collaborative work that will aid them in developing the

academic skills and knowledge to problem solve and become real world thinkers and doers.

Atkins (2010) shared:

> Effective communication and collaboration are essential to becoming a successful
>
> learner. It is primarily through dialogue and examining different perspectives that
>
> students become knowledgeable, strategic, self-determined, and empathetic. Moreover,
>
> involving students in real-world tasks and linking new information to prior knowledge
>
> requires effective communication and collaboration among teachers, students, and others.
>
> Indeed, it is through dialogue and interaction that curriculum objectives come alive.
>
> Collaborative learning affords students enormous advantages not available from more
>
> traditional instruction because a group-whether it be the whole class or a learning group
>
> within the class-can accomplish meaningful learning and solve problems better than any
>
> individual can alone. (p.13)

Creating a collaborative culture among teachers and students requires time to develop and the process begins with school leaders. According to Honingh and Hooge (2014), school leaders who support, challenge, and encourage teachers to collaborate increase the amount of teachers engaged in productive and meaningful collaboration. Simply stated, school leaders directly impact the culture of collaboration within schools. Creating a culture of effective collaboration holds significant value in improving a school's student performance and academic success, because teacher collaboration is a factor of school effectiveness and school improvement (Honingh & Hooge, 2014). Likewise, other teachers, administrators, and educators can utilize the findings from this study to promote awareness of the ever-changing needs of student learners, as well as advocate for more personalized professional learning opportunities that will improve teacher effect in the classroom and schools. Adequate training and support in these areas could

empower teachers to become teacher leaders and support the collaborative learning initiatives at

and outside of their respective schools.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
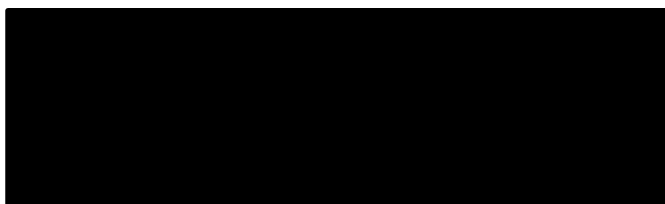
May 1, 2015

Sheryl E. Ackers
IRB Approval 2141.050115: A Phenomenological Study of Collaborative Learning:
Understanding the Perceptions, Values, and Experiences of Freshmen Language Arts
Students and Teachers

Dear Sheryl,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB.
This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your
protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the
methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update
form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research
project.

Sincerely,

LIBERTY
UNIVERSITY.

Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971

APPENDIX B: STUDENT CONSENT FORM

Parental Consent Form

**A Phenomenological Study of Collaborative Learning: Understanding the Perceptions,
Values, and Experiences of Freshmen Language Arts Students and Teachers**
Sheryl Ackers, doctoral candidate
School of Education, Liberty University

Your child is invited to participate in a research study focused on understanding the perceptions and experiences of freshmen language arts students with collaborative instruction. He or she was selected as a possible participant because he/she is a freshman language arts student enrolled in a college preparatory language arts course. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to allow your child to participant in the study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to identify the strategies, methods, and models of instruction most effective for collaborative instruction within the general education classroom through understanding the perceptions and experiences of freshmen language arts students and teachers.

Procedures:

If you agree to allow your child to participate in my research, I will ask him or her to do the following things:

1) Participate in a less than 60-minute interview (times estimated to be 15-20 minutes) conducted by me at a time that is convenient at a location within your current high school where your child will share his or her experiences and perceptions with collaborative instruction. With your permission, I will audiotape and take notes of your child's responses during the interview. The recording is to accurately record the information your child provides and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose for you child not to be audiotaped, I will take notes instead. If you agree

for your child to be audiotaped but he or she feels uncomfortable at any time during

the interview, I will turn off the recorder at the child's request.

2) Participate in a follow-up interview if clarification is necessary. I expect to conduct

   only one interview; however, follow-ups may be needed for added clarification. If so,

   I will contact you on behalf of your child by mail/phone to request a follow-up.

3) Review transcripts of the audio recording of the interview, following the interview, to

   check for accuracy.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The risks are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life. Your child

will not receive a direct benefit from participation in the current research study.

Compensation:

Your child will not receive payment or compensation for participation in this study.

Confidentiality:

Your child's records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might

publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify your child.

Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.

In order to protect your child's privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used. No

child's identity will be identifiable in the presentation of the data and analysis. Data will be

stored on an external flash drive with password protection, accessible only to the principal

investigator. Audio recordings will be locked away securely in a filing cabinet. No one will have

access to data that in any way links back to your child. Data collected is required to be kept for

three years. Once the three year time period has passed, all data will be erased from the external

flash drive, with no data maintained.

The anticipated use of the data in the future is only for educational benefits assisting in a better understanding of how teachers and support staff can develop and structure classroom collaborative instructional models to meet students' instructional needs in order to increase student achievement.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to allow or not allow your child to participate will not affect his or her current or future relations with Liberty University or with Gwinnett County Public Schools System. If your child decides to participate, he or she is free to not answer any question or to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. To formally withdraw from this research study, you should provide a written and dated notice of this decision to the principal investigator of this research study via email at ██████████. Following withdrawal from the research study, your child's data in connection to the research study will be removed from any files/storage areas and will be destroyed.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Sheryl E. Ackers. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ███████████ ████████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. David Nelson, ███████████) or by email at ████████████.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have

received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ I consent to being audio-recorded by the researcher during the interview as stated in this
document.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of parent or guardian: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX C: TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent Form

A Phenomenological Study of Collaborative Learning: Understanding the Perceptions, Values, and Experiences of Freshmen Language Arts Students and Teachers
Sheryl Ackers, doctoral candidate
School of Education, Liberty University

You are invited to participate in a research study focused on understanding the perceptions and experiences of freshmen language arts teachers, students, and an administrator with collaborative instruction. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a freshman language arts teacher or administrator who either has taught, is teaching, or has experience with a college preparatory language arts course. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participant in the study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to identify the strategies, methods, and models of instruction most effective for collaborative instruction within the general education classroom through understanding the perceptions and experiences of freshmen language arts students, teachers, and an administrator.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate in my research, I will ask you to do the following things:

1) Participate in a less than 60-minute interview conducted by me at a time that is convenient at a location within your current high school where you will share your experiences and perceptions with collaborative instruction. With your permission, I will audiotape and take notes during the interview. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be audiotaped, I will take notes instead. If you agree to being

audiotaped but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, I will turn off the

recorder at your request.

2) Participate in a follow-up interview if clarification is necessary. I expect to conduct

   only one interview; however, follow-ups may be needed for added clarification. If so,

   I will contact you by email to request a follow-up.

3) Review transcripts of the audio recording of the interview, following the interview, to

   check for accuracy.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The risks are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life. Participants

will not receive a direct benefit from participation in the current research study.

Compensation:

You will not receive payment or compensation for participation in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will

not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will

be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.

In order to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used. No

participant's identity will be identifiable in the presentation of the data and analysis. Data will be

stored on an external flash drive with password protection, accessible only to the principal

investigator. Audio recordings will be locked away securely in a filing cabinet. No one will have

access to data that in any way links back to participants. Data collected is required to be kept for

three years. Once the three year time period has passed, all data will be erased from the external

flash drive, with no data maintained.

audiotaped but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, I will turn off the

recorder at your request.

2) Participate in a follow-up interview if clarification is necessary. I expect to conduct

    only one interview; however, follow-ups may be needed for added clarification. If so,

    I will contact you by email to request a follow-up.

3) Review transcripts of the audio recording of the interview, following the interview, to

    check for accuracy.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The risks are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life. Participants

will not receive a direct benefit from participation in the current research study.

Compensation:

You will not receive payment or compensation for participation in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will

not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will

be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.

In order to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used. No

participant's identity will be identifiable in the presentation of the data and analysis. Data will be

stored on an external flash drive with password protection, accessible only to the principal

investigator. Audio recordings will be locked away securely in a filing cabinet. No one will have

access to data that in any way links back to participants. Data collected is required to be kept for

three years. Once the three year time period has passed, all data will be erased from the external

flash drive, with no data maintained.

The anticipated use of the data in the future is only for educational benefits assisting in a better understanding of how teachers and support staff can develop and structure classroom collaborative instructional models to meet students' instructional needs in order to increase student achievement.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or with Gwinnett County Public Schools System. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. To formally withdraw from this research study, you should provide a written and dated notice of this decision to the principal investigator of this research study via email at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. Following withdrawal from the research study, participants' data in connection to the research study will be removed from any files/storage areas and will be destroyed.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Sheryl E. Ackers. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. David Nelson, at ▮▮▮▮▮▮ by email at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have

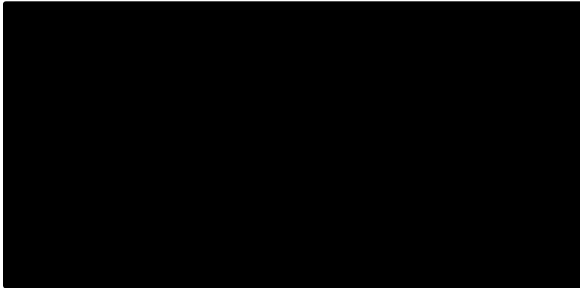received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ I consent to being audio-recorded by the researcher during the interview as stated in this document.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX D: LOCAL SCHOOL APPROVAL REQUEST LETTER

March 16, 2015

██████████████████████████

Dear ████████

As a graduate student in the department of education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate degree. The title of my research study is: *A Phenomenological Study of Collaborative Learning: Understanding the Perceptions, Values, and Experiences of Freshmen Language Arts Students and Teachers*. The purpose of my research is to gain a deeper understanding of collaborative learning through the perspective of freshmen language arts teachers, students, and an administrator.
I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research in ███████████████ I will contact members of your faculty and students within your school to invite them to participate in my research study.

Each participant will be asked to participate in one semi-structured less than 60 minute interview. The data will be used to identify the strategies, methods, and models of instruction most effective for collaborative instruction within the general education classroom. Participants will be presented with informed consent and/or assent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on approved letterhead indicating your approval.

Sincerely,

Sheryl E. Ackers

APPENDIX E: STUDENT PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER

Date: May 04, 2015

Greetings, parents/guardians,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a degree. The purpose of my research is to investigate teachers', students', and an administrator's perceptions and experiences with collaborative instruction in order to identify the strategies, methods, and models of instruction most effective for collaborative instruction within the general education classroom. I am writing to invite your child to participate in my study.

Your child was selected to participate in the current research study because he/she is a freshman enrolled in a college preparatory language arts class. If you allow your child to participate in this study, he or she will be asked to take part in a semi-structured interview that will last approximately 15-20 minutes, with no interview time exceeding 60 minutes. The questions for this interview will focus on your child's perceptions of and experiences with collaborative instruction. Your child may also be asked to participate in a follow-up interview if clarification is necessary. Participants will also be asked to review transcripts of the audio recording of the interview, following the interview, to check for accuracy. For your child to participate, please read through the attached consent/assent form, ask any questions you may have, sign it, have your child sign it, and then send the signed consent/assent form back to school with your child to return to his/her language arts teacher. It should take only a few minutes for you to complete the procedures listed. Your child's participation will be kept confidential. I will contact the students to schedule an interview.

Please sign the consent document and return it to me within the next week so that I can arrange a time to interview your child. You can contact me at any time with questions regarding this research at:

Participants will not be compensated for participation in this research study. Participants' responses will assist in finding more effective strategies, methods, and models of instruction, to strengthen the collaborative learning process. I look forward to working with you and your child.

Sincerely,

Sheryl E. Ackers

APPENDIX F: ADULT PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER

Date: May 4, 2015

Greetings, teachers/administrators,

As a graduate student in the education department at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a degree. The purpose of my research is to investigate teachers', students', and an administrator's perceptions and experiences with collaborative instruction in order to identify the strategies, methods, and models of instruction most effective for collaborative instruction within the general education classroom. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

You were selected to participate in the current research study because you teach or have recently taught a freshman college preparatory language arts class. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in a semi-structured interview that will last approximately 15-20 minutes, with no interview time exceeding 60 minutes. The questions for this interview will focus on your perceptions and experiences with collaborative instruction as a teacher and/or administrator of freshman language arts students. You may also be asked to participate in a follow-up interview, if clarification is necessary. Participants will also be asked to review transcripts of the audio recording of the interview, following the interview, to check for accuracy. In order to participate, please read through the attached consent/assent form, ask any questions you may have, sign it, and return the form back to the primary investigator. It should take only a few minutes for you to complete the procedures listed. **Your participation will be kept confidential.** If you are interested in doing so now, please indicate a date and time wherein I can arrange to interview you: _____.

You can contact me at any time with questions regarding this research at: ███████████

Participants will not be compensated for participation in this research study. Participants' responses will assist in finding more effective strategies, methods, and models of instruction, to strengthen the collaborative learning process. I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Sheryl E. Ackers

APPENDIX G: SAMPLE TEACHER TRANSCRIPTION EXCERPT

Question 7

Interviewer: What do you believe, umm, sorry, why do you believe that collaborative learning is, or is not, beneficial for both students and teachers and for teaching and learning?

Interviewee: I think it's beneficial for students because it changes things up for them and this time that we live in now, where there's so much distractions, and students' attention spans are kind of at a premium because there's so much going on that that grasps their attention being able to change things up and put them in different groups really uh lends itself to our world today and of course there's so many jobs that they will have to be able to work collaboratively on as adults so I think that, just the structure of being able to work in a group is beneficial for them. For certain, for students who struggle, I think collaborative teaches, like two teachers in the room could definitely help some students out, but like I said, there would have to be, like I alluded to in the last question, there would definitely have to be the right situation.

Interviewer: What is the right situation?

Interviewee: Well, the same teachers doing it for period after period for multiple classes, maybe year after year even, developing more of a report together.

Interviewer: Hmm, okay, so, kind of like the middle school team concept idea?

Interviewee: Umm, yeah, yeah, but instead the two teachers are the collaborative team.

Interviewer: Now, umm, what about teachers, so you talk about students and you talk about their learning, what about teachers and their teaching beyond those who have a co-teacher, teachers that are just collaborating with their peers during planning or before/after school, how do you think collaborative learning is beneficial for teachers?

Interviewee: So, how do I think collaborative learning, so students' collaborative learning, how is that beneficial for teachers?

Interviewer: Yes, and teachers collaborating with other teachers?

Interviewee: Well, teachers have to collaborate with other teachers. I mean, like your pedagogy has to evolve and you have to bounce, umm ideas off of each other—see what worked, what didn't work, this activity worked with this class, what did you do, all that's even better, that kind of stuff. And, I still don't understand the first part of the question—how does collaborative learning for students benefit teachers?

Interviewer: Yes. What do you think teachers can learn from seeing students engaged in collaborative learning activities?

Interviewee: You definitely get a sense of what students are capable of because I've seen students that are reluctant to try something new or really go out on the limb and do something creative when they have the option on their own they're much more willing to do something extraordinary in a group setting. So you can see, I've seen for sure in my career, students do stuff in a group that I never would've imagined that they would've done individually as far as output or product.

Interviewer: Do you feel like students learn more when they're doing collaborative work?

Interviewee: I don't know if they learn more of the content but they definitely learn more strategies to work with other people; they learn that, and I think they really do learn how to be more creative. They learn how other people think and I guess that could impact their content knowledge or whatever the lesson is teaching them. But I think by and large they learn how to function in a group setting and how to produce something of merit, something of value.

Question 8

Interviewer: Okay, number 8, umm, with the move towards collaboration models, what do you feel local professional development sessions are lacking in relation to teacher preparation for effective collaboration amongst and between teachers?

Interviewee: Uhh, I've never sat in any kind of professional development that says these are best practices for collaborative teaching. I've sat in some that have good strategies for how to have effective meetings with teachers, umm, how to you know, set norms, stuff like that—I think that helps for sure, but I definitely think there is a lack of professional development for how to function as a co-teacher setting, I think would be beneficial.

Question 9

Interviewer: Okay, number 9, discuss which topics, in connection to collaboration, you would find most useful in a professional development session?

Interviewee: Like I just said, definitely some best practices maybe for how to co-teach classes. You know, even, even some professional development on teachers that have put students, you know, really effective strategies for students collaboratively learning and working in groups. I feel like a lot of the times teachers just say "oh, I'll put them in groups and let them do it", but there may be some better professional development, some advice on what the workload should look like, how independent students should be when they're working collaboratively, that sounds kind of like a paradox, doesn't it? Independent collaboration…

Question 10

Interviewer: Okay…how do you feel about current teacher mentoring programs that utilize collaboration? I know you've had some experiences with a teacher mentor.

Interviewee: That utilize collaboration…honestly, I feel like teacher mentoring programs, like induction programs, that's what you're talking about, like induction programs and stuff like that for new teachers?

Interviewer: Yeah, new teachers coming into the school and…

Interviewee: A lot of times, the ones I've seen, they kind of just go through the motions, as in "oh, this is something we have to do"..,

Interviewer: What are motions?

Interviewee: Umm, we have to have this meeting; we have to give this person a mentor; they have to sit in meetings together; they have to watch each other teach; they have to accomplish this list of questions to ask each other in an interview, something like that, but then at the same time, but that new teacher will find their own person to talk to that will really be their mentor, so…

Interviewer: Hmm…and what do you think leads a person to find a teacher aside from the assigned mentor?

Interviewee: *(insert sigh)* Maybe if they just get along, sometimes they are the same age, sometimes they have similar backgrounds, they teach the same thing, somebody maybe have more experience, or is more friendly, more available..

Interviewer: So, someone who provides more of a comfort?

Interviewer: Yeah, comfort for various reasons.

Interviewer: So do you think it'd be best that new teachers coming in, new as in new to a new building, umm, if they selected their own mentors, or if they were assigned?

Interviewee: No, I see, I mean I know why districts and schools have to assign mentors 'cause so many teachers wouldn't do it, they wouldn't go and seek their own mentor or they'd feel kind

of nervous and wouldn't know who the heck to talk to or who to select as their mentor in the first week of school. But, so I understand teachers, they have to do something, but it's just not really an organic relationship between forcing someone, saying "here's your mentor—this is who you're going to get advice from," but I don't really know what would be better, that's just in my experience.

Question 11

Interviewer: Okay. Umm, explain why you think collaborative learning is helpful for post-educational work.

Interviewee: 'Cause so much of uhh…

Interviewer: I know you kinda alluded to it earlier.

Interviewee: Yeah, so much of the, like any job in the workplace requires collaboration—I mean I only know being a teacher, but umm, you have to, as a teacher, like what we talked about today you have to collaborate with others. My sister's a pharmacist and she works in an office with six other pharmacists, they have to collaborate, and if they don't maybe a patient gets the wrong medication, and you could go on and on with jobs that require collaboration and meetings and people skills, so it's essential.