EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN COLLABORATION PRACTICES
RELATED TO DEVELOPING PROFESSIONALLY: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

by Linda Alston-Morgan
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 qualitative case study was to examine early childhood teachers’ experiences in collaboration practices to support teacher professional development in three early childhood schools in Central New Jersey. The theory guiding this study was social cognitive theory by Bandura (1986), which focuses on learning through observations and social interactions. Bandura’s theory aligned with the study and revealed how collaborative opportunities are utilized as an approach to help teachers learn from each other and develop professionally. However, specific activities underlying the professional development of teachers during the collaborative sessions need more exploration. The research included data regarding early childhood educators’ experiences in collaboration relating to professional development and teacher perceptions of the quality of these collaborative experiences that influence their professional growth. The study consisted of individual, semi-structured face-to-face interviews, focus group sessions, and a questionnaire. The narrative data was analyzed and categorized by three themes: (1) Professional Growth Opportunities, (2) Culture, and (3) Need for Differentiated Professional Development. The findings relative to the sample size suggest that the types of collaborative opportunities early childhood teachers participate impact the degree of professional growth teachers experience.

Keywords: early childhood education, collaboration, professional development, social cognitive theory
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Dedication

First and foremost, I want to thank my Heavenly Father, God Almighty from whom all blessings flow, who gave me the courage, the strength, and increased faith to accomplish such a huge endeavor. I will forever worship and praise you.

To my husband of 22 years and 12-year-old daughter who spent countless hours at the dinner table alone or on weekend outings without me, but extended limitless patience, encouragement, and hugs that I cannot do without, now. Daughter, this accomplishment is for you, and demonstrates that with God all things are possible. Pursue your passions and what you love, but more importantly, pray that you discover the vision God has for your life and you will live your dreams.

To my family and closest friends who believe in me, prayed for and with me, and always shared their wisdom rooted in God’s word. To the memory of my older siblings, who always believed in my abilities. You never let me give up through the difficult times. I am forever grateful for your support and friendship.
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Proverbs 3:5-6 says, “Trust in the Lord with all thy heart and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct your path” (NKJV). Galatians 6:9 says, “Let us not grow weary in doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart” (NKJV). I shared these verses to say, the word of God encouraged me through this challenging yet rewarding season, and I am so grateful that the Lord placed it on my heart to continue my education. The completion of this journey would not have been possible without Him.

I have to thank Dr. Rebecca Lunde for being the best chair ever! You are truly great at what you do. Thank you for your constant support, understanding, and wisdom. Your prompt responses to my emails and text messages were always succinct and helpful. I thrived on your Weekly Announcements which were full of Godly encouragement and guidance. Your door was always open.

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Lastly, I want to thank the amazing educators who carved out time in their busy schedules to share genuine thoughts and advice to worthwhile research that could impact early childhood teachers’ professional growth experience. I am indebted to you always. Thank you all!
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Early Childhood Education (ECE)
Class Visit (CV)
Professional Development (PD)
Professional Learning Community (PLC)
Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)
Social Learning Theory (SLT)
Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Children across the country participate in early childhood education for a significant number of hours per week and the prospect that these programs may influence children’s cognitive, academic, social, and emotional progress is high (Brunsek et al., 2020). The two components that are targeted most often through professional development due to their connection with high-quality early childhood experiences are teachers’ perspectives of quality professional development (PD) and practices. The results of this study contributed to knowledge about the collaboration early childhood teachers engage during informal and formal opportunities as it relates to developing professionally. Collaboration is defined as a process in which individuals work together to improve the total output compared to what they could accomplish on their own (Bush & Grotjohann, 2020). The method of interacting dispels the feelings of isolation and offers spaces for dialogue and reflection. Chapter one covered the following topics: the focus of the study, the rationale for the study, definitions of terms, research questions, and significance of the problem.

Background

Teachers’ professional development is mainly the result of formal and informal social interactions among the teachers, situated in the context of their school and their classrooms and allocated across the entire staff (Woodland & Mazur, 2018). According to Tichenor Tichenor (2018) and Little (1990), an important aspect of teaching and learning is the collaboration among teachers which includes co-teaching, peer observation and coaching, research, and team planning. Genuine engagement in these lively collaborations supports student achievement and allows teachers to learn with others (Peel, 2020). Moreover, Bush Grotjohann (2019) defined
collaboration as a process in which individuals work together to improve the total output compared to what they could have done individually. Garcia-Martinez et al. (2021) described collaboration as a group of relationships in which the bonds of trust are created between various agents, with direct consequences on their individual achievement and the school’s professional culture. Both definitions of collaboration are characterized by several individuals who work together to achieve common objectives. Nonetheless, intensive teacher collaboration is seldom employed in schools and is also often rejected by teachers, despite research findings supporting its benefits (Muckenthaler et al., 2020). Although studies have been done on how teachers collaborate, more extensive studies that focus on informal and formal collaboration practices within the job itself that help early childhood teachers develop professionally are needed.

Effective PD for teachers is considered one of the most promising interventions for addressing teacher quality (McKeown et al., 2018). Not only can collaboration among teachers provide possibilities for change in pedagogical learning (Lockton, 2019), intense collaboration can result in teachers feeling supported, reduced feelings of isolation, and improved teaching effectiveness leading to increased outcomes for teachers and students (Vangrieken & Kyndt, 2020). There are, however, differing viewpoints on what is considered purposeful collaboration and how these experiences should be designed, implemented, and delivered. Traditionally, professional development for teachers once known as one-off events or group workshops have shown to have little impact on changes in teaching practices (Schachter et al., 2019; Gardner-Neblett et al. 2020). These practices have shifted to ongoing and consistent professional development that is both context and experience specific. Little (1990) presented a continuum of collaboration that is identified by increased levels of social interdependence that begins with basic contact and affiliations: storytelling and scanning for ideas found at the independence end,
followed by aid and assistance, and sharing joint work, the highest level of interdependence. Similarly, de Jong et al. (2019) supported Little’s (1990) levels of interdependence and claims that teacher collaboration can form a productive context for teacher professional learning. Within this context several ideas of teacher collaboration exist which relates to the content of teachers’ conversations, the roles and responsibilities they adopt, the features that epitomize the teacher group, and the degree to which teacher interactions are interdependent.

Although education and school systems may dictate the level to which teachers participate in professional development activities, numerous school-related, teacher-related and student-related issues affect the level to which PD opportunities ultimately produce the intended teaching and learning outcomes (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019). Borko (2004) suggested that educators have to not only consider the individual characteristics of teachers in regard to learning activities, but the social context in which teachers learn and participate. Nonetheless, there is a growing body of research that suggests professional development (PD) is more effective when it is continuous, collaborative, subject-specific, draws on external expertise, and has teacher buy-in (Bergmark, 2020; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021).

For the last two decades, collaboration has been utilized as a PD strategy for strengthening teacher practice, among other school initiatives (Weddle et al., 2019; Howard, 2019). In fact, Johnson (2003) claimed that more collaboration in schools will promote moral support; increased efficiency; improved effectiveness; teacher reflection and learning and continuous improvement. Similarly, Visone et al. (2021) states it is significantly important for school leaders to support teacher professional collaboration in order to increase collective effectiveness.
Collaboration is viewed as a critical component for improving teaching and learning (Datnow & Park, 2019), and although collaboration occurs in many different ways, this study will highlight informal and formal collaboration practices in which early childhood teachers engage. Different terms have been used to describe these collaborative groups including professional learning communities (PLCs), communities of practice (CoP), teacher clusters, teacher networks, professional and affiliation networks, workplace learning, and networked learning communities (Akinyemi et al., 2019). For the purpose of this study, the term collaboration practices was used to maintain clarity and consistency. Further, research suggests that collaboration is a foundational component of supportive working conditions, and that adult collaboration is crucial to building internal capacity, improving instructional practice and to influencing student achievement (Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2019). The assumption is that any activity that reduces teacher isolation will be advantageous to teacher development. To facilitate professional collaboration, school districts have dedicated time for grade-level teams and groups to meet, discuss ideas, and exchange information with the goal of developing their practice and increasing student learning (Weddle et al., 2019).

Over the years, a large amount of funding has been allocated in the United States at the federal, state, and local levels to provide teacher professional development focused on improving student achievement with collaborative teacher learning and discussion of instructional practices as integral components of effective professional development (Xin Liang, Lenhart, & Ressa, 2020). Professional development is referred to by other names including in-service, staff development, workshops, or professional learning. But no matter the phrase, the purpose should be the same - to improve learning for educators and as a result, increase student outcomes. Although this task seems like a clear-cut mandate, designing and providing effective professional
development to and for all teachers is complex. There have been attempts to establish specific criteria of professional development to improve teacher quality and student learning. Despite research there was little evidence to confirm the characteristics of effective professional development. Sancar et al. (2021) stated that researchers have not yet presented a proper understanding of the concept, scope, and features of teacher PD. However, professional development, according to Sims & Fletcher-Wood (2021), is likely to improve student outcomes if it is sustained, has teacher buy-in, subject-specific, includes external experts, and is practice-based. The implication is to better understand the needs of teachers and how they perceive the value and quality of their collaborative experiences.

In many countries, the early childhood education (ECE) workforce is made up of educators with a diverse range of roles, backgrounds, and qualifications. A variety makes it difficult to raise the quality of early childhood education practice and to engage all early childhood educators in professional learning that equips them to actively support children’s learning and development (Jackson, 2021). The connection a child has with an educator—including the extent to which the child experiences care that is sensitive, responsive, and rich in verbal and cognitive stimulation, is regarded as the central component of ECE quality (Brunsek, et al., 2020). Over the last decade, the enrollment in early childhood education has increased with implementation of new policies that acknowledge the support these early programs provide and the impact they have on children’s growth, overall. However, there is not as much research on support of the early childhood teacher even though quality staff is central to quality early childhood environments (Harding et al., 2019).
**Historical Context**

In the late 1980s and 1990s, the perception of teaching was seen as an individualistic, sink or swim profession (Glazier, 2016). Collaboration was typically described as the opposite of isolation (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018), but teacher collaboration has now given rise to endeavors to permit more professional interactions among teachers. According to Hargreaves (2001), when teachers collaborate, it gives them access to the new and innovative ideas and moral support that help them to be more productive and effective. Other researchers say that collaboration between teachers in collaborative cultures occurs in various forms— from hierarchically to more horizontally (Nguyen & Ng, 2020; Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018). It can be spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, pervasive across time and space, and unpredictable (Hargreaves, 2001). Further, Benjamin (2000) argued that the increase in outcomes occurs when teachers collaborate and are able to focus, reflect, and evaluate their practice jointly. Details of collaborative learning found in literature and its positive influence on teachers, students, and school culture (Naujokaityte & Passey, 2019; Meyer et al., 2020) is pertinent to the enhancement of teaching practices. Collaboration practices are the activities of learning together, sharing new ideas, and critiquing ideas to improve them. Meyer et al. (2020) suggested that teacher collaboration results in good teaching, improved student achievement, and schools should support their teachers’ collaborative efforts to gain these results. Teacher collaboration is a critical aspect of teachers’ professional lives, as a means to continuously reflect and improve the practice of teaching (De Jong, 2019). Teacher collaboration has become closely linked to many improvement efforts within educational systems world-wide with the perceived need for more collaborative opportunities that are high quality and effective (Borko et al., 2010). Effective schools, as measured by student achievement data, are characterized by a high level of
collaboration and unity among teachers (Muckenthaler, 2020). Traditionally, most professional development opportunities offered to teachers were ineffective drive-by, inservice workshops (Darling-Hammond, 2009) short in nature and where the employer had control and the government set the goals (Villegas-Reimers, 2003; Muckenthaler et al., 2020). Studies confirm that teacher collaboration is a favorable environment for teacher professional learning (De Jong, 2021) Collaboration is one of the 6Cs of 21st century teaching and learning competencies and is understood as the ability to work in teams, learn from and contribute to the learning of others, social network, and show empathy when working with a diverse group of individuals (Howard, 2019).

According to Bergmark (2020), professional development has historically focused on single events, such as lectures and workshops led by external experts, to promote a teacher’s mastery of certain skills and competencies. The research on early childhood indicates that the experiences are not equally effective at enhancing teacher knowledge, cultivating teacher pedagogy, or improving child outcomes (Schachter, 2019). Specifically, collaboration in the early childhood setting lacks guidance and poses a challenge for school leadership in selecting the most beneficial PD for EC teachers. However, with the implementation of Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), educators have been appointed to new functions connected to student success based on the adopted academic standards that serve as the foundation on which districts construct sound curriculum and instruction. Prior to ESSA, the Common Core State Standards in 2010 brought the requirements of what students in grades K-12 should know and be able to do. The objective was to support students in seeking college and career readiness, with the hopes to be more competitive in the job market.
The advent of the standards came about due to the dissatisfaction of the Bush’s administration’s No Child Left Behind Act (2002) which was meant to narrow the achievement gap between high and low performing students. Moreover, the implementation of the Common Core State Standards in grades K-12 obviously overlaps with early childhood education. The implication is that the future success of the CCSS in elementary or high school levels is determined by the foundation laid in grades K-3. Some researchers find that early childhood education has favorable effects on children’s cognitive development, pre-academic skills, and to an extent, socio-emotional development. Jensen Wurtz Rasmussen (2018) noted that one of the main reasons for offering pre-school education is to reduce the achievement gap related to income disparity and to improve children’s school readiness as measured by various child outcome measures. To improve child outcomes, early childhood educators need to demonstrate improved knowledge and skills of effective teaching practices. Therefore, to ensure the smooth transition from early childhood education to elementary school education, educators need more cooperative and collaborative opportunities (Zhang et al., 2021).

Social Context

There is a large body of research that early childhood education has a solid impact on long-term child outcomes during and at the conclusion of participation including school readiness, cognitive abilities, graduation rates, earnings, health, criminal activity, and well-being (Joo et al., 2019; Dietrichson, et al., 2020). For preschool programs to eradicate educational opportunity gaps, the programs must be high-quality (Rojas et al, 2020). The increased interest has turned towards professional learning of early childhood educators internationally, both from policymakers and from the research field (Stav Holm et al., 2021). Early childhood educators are being held more accountable for student achievement; therefore, it is important for ECE to
receive the most appropriate professional development that addresses their needs to improve
teacher practice and the quality of early childhood classrooms. Notwithstanding, early childhood
educators have to address many cultural, educational, and social challenges and must adjust their
teaching as the nature of society, youth and families change (Fonsen, 2019). Research over the
last decade has reported that for professional development to be effective, in terms of changing
teachers’ knowledge and/or instructional strategies, it needs to be conducted taking into
consideration the following factors: teachers’ existing knowledge, experience and attitudes about
the professional development, school administrative factors, opportunities to follow up during
class visits and gathering data concerning student achievement to measure the impact or
effectiveness of the professional development (Scarparolo & Hammond, 2018). It is increasingly
recognized that social learning by teachers can encourage professional development as
participating in networks for social learning and knowledge sharing has become an important
part of lifelong professional development for teachers and other professionals (Vrieling et al.,
2018). Teachers develop relationships inside and outside of the classroom and in various social
contexts, that help them learn, problem-solve, and consider new ideas. Literature on teachers
learning through social contexts within the school provides opportunities for continuous
learning. Community is related to inclusive membership, mutual trust, respect and support, and
the particular emphasis on the collective learning of professionals within the community where
new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured (Wai-Yan Wan, 2020).

**Theoretical Context**

The purpose of teachers’ professional development is to enhance their practice for better
performance of their learners (Oluwatoyin Ayodele, 2019). Therefore, it is necessary for teachers
to have the ability to infuse the learning from professional development activities into their
practice. Subsequently, the ability to do so will also determine the success and effectiveness of those activities. Several learning theories have been utilized to outline/determine how teachers learn during professional development opportunities and in what ways learning is transferred to the classroom. Researchers have explored multiple learning theories to better understand professional development and the impact on teachers’ learning. Borko (2004) posits that learning theories of professional development should include both cognitive and social aspects of learning; however, theory has leaned towards either cognitive or social perspectives. For example, Eun (2018) explored cognitive learning theory (Bandura, 1986, 1999) espousing that an individual’s personal nature, behavioral and environmental events work together and influence one another. The distinct cognitive functions and attitudes including self-efficacy, of an individual all impact what types of environments and events the individual will choose to happen within that environment. Similarly, Aaron Blevins (2019) utilized social cognitive theory to examine organizational change stating that people are the key component of any organizational change as they learn through interactions and experiences. Both support the notion that professional development opportunities grounded in social learning include conversations, learning communities, collaboration, and authentic work. He further postulated that teachers should also have thorough knowledge of their specific content areas, exercise effective instructional delivery and classroom management skills while considering the different learning modalities of their students. His claim confirmed what educators have deliberated about for years - making teachers better teachers is the aim of professional development. Consequently, there is some in-service training that teachers are required to attend to enhance or reinforce their classroom practices. Like children, teachers have various learning needs and require different experiences which may pose a challenge when considering the type of professional learning
activities to offer.

According to Oluwatoyin Ayodele (2019), the disconnection between learning and teaching and the unrelatedness of the learning activities are two reasons for ineffective learning during professional development. The goal is to have an effective job-embedded professional development program that offers differentiation and impacts teacher quality. According to Sancar et al. (2021), research on education has debated whether or not teacher quality is the top component that impacts student achievement and improves school quality. However, another aspect to consider is how teachers’ personal and professional lives affect their professional development needs. Furthermore, studies of contextual factors show that teachers’ living conditions, wellbeing and job satisfaction contribute to variation in effectiveness, without being properly acknowledged by policymakers and school leaders. Thus, educational stakeholders have sought to improve the quality of teaching to improve student success.

**Problem Statement**

The problem in early childhood education is that teachers are required to participate in professional development that, often, is unrelated to their needs and does not enhance their professional competencies. The lack of targeted and effective professional development for early childhood educators hinders capacity building, application of new knowledge, and reflection (Schachter et al., 2019). Education is constantly changing, and high-quality teaching is always in demand and teachers must constantly increase their knowledge and redesign their practice to improve learning. Liang (2020) believed that an important indicator for quality and effectiveness of professional development is change in teaching practice. However, if effective professional development opportunities are limited to ECE then the outcomes for preschool children could be adversely impacted.
Professional development is a favorable way of improving the teaching quality of early childhood educators and thereby improving student learning (Jensen & Wurtz Rasmussen, 2018). Professional development is most effective, according to Baker (2018), when it has the following six qualities: contains specific objectives, allows for knowledge and practice connection, fosters teacher collaboration, timely sessions are relevant to content, includes assessment strategies, and aligns with learning standards and organizational goals. The problem is that experiences in collaboration for early childhood educators are not equally effective at assisting teachers in developing professionally, making it challenging for teachers and school leaders to devise professional development opportunities that will benefit teaching and learning (Schachter et al., 2019). The lack of sufficient, relevant, and collaborative PD creates a problem for those in charge of devising and implementing purposeful professional learning.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine early childhood teachers’ collaboration experiences relating to professional development. At this stage in research, collaboration was defined as a process in which individuals work together to improve the total output compared to what they could accomplish on their own (Bush & Grotjohann, 2020). The theory guiding this study was social cognitive theory found in the works of Bandura. Social cognitive theory posits that humans have the capacity for observational learning that enables them to develop their knowledge and skills from information conveyed by modeling influences (Bandura, 1986). While the significance of collaboration as a professional development approach for increased teacher knowledge and student learning is widely acknowledged, multiple studies conducted (Gragg, 2021; Nguyen & Ng, 2020; Nordgren et al., 2021) have been committed to enhancing its effectiveness, the specific domains underlying collaboration and how it translates
from experience into actual classroom practices are not well known. Experiences of early childhood teachers employing collaborative practices as it relates to developing professionally were included in this study.

**Significance of the Study**

The study revealed how early childhood programs impact teacher collaboration practices to support teachers’ professional development. The results of the study added to the research on how early childhood educators collaborate to improve teacher knowledge and enhance teacher pedagogy. Reviews on teacher professional learning aims at collaboration as an essential component of effective professional development. Learning experiences are effective when teachers come together to examine their teaching practice (de Jong et al., 2021) providing opportunities for teachers to exchange expertise resulting in enhanced instructional skills and eventually instructional practice (Vangrieken & Kyndt, 2020). According to Oluwatoyin Ayodele (2019), the disconnection between learning and teaching and the unrelatedness of the activities are two reasons for ineffective learning during professional development. The goal is to have an effective professional development program that offers differentiation and impacts teacher quality. According to Sancar et al. (2021), research on education has debated whether or not teacher quality is the top component that impacts student achievement and improves school quality.

The study follows a theoretical framework developed by Bandura (1986), social cognitive theory, which was used to ground professional development and explains its process and components for learning that might make it effective. This study extended the development of social cognitive theory that the process of learning is through the effects of one’s actions. Bandura (1986) posited that people establish connections between stimuli and responses and the
consequence or rewards of these trial-and-error performances are shortcut through social modeling. In social modeling people shape their styles of thinking and behaving after the useful ones are demonstrated by others. While Bandura’s theory focuses on how individuals learn from others through social modeling, this study endorsed social cognitive theory by revealing how teacher collaboration can be utilized as an approach to help teachers collaboratively learn from others and develop professionally.

The empirical evidence in this study shows how early childhood teachers engage in collaborative practices to support their professional development. In early childhood education, professional development covers the entire scope of education and training opportunities for ECE teachers, ranging from a workshop to a university degree (Egert et al., 2018). It consists of various learning opportunities to reinforce professional knowledge and skills focused on teacher development that improve student learning. In this study, researching early childhood educator’s experiences with collaborative practices related to professional development will contribute to improving and sustaining a culture that supports and promotes teacher collaborative learning and highlight the specific circumstances under which the most effective form of collaboration takes place.

The present study, early childhood teachers’ collaboration practices related to developing professionally contributed to the knowledge and expertise of teachers, school administrators, and the broader school community. It may also enhance teaching conditions and the school environment. Existing literature emphasizes the benefits of teacher collaboration as a professional development approach to help teachers feel more supported, reduce feelings of isolation, improve teaching effectiveness with many opportunities to observe, coach and mentor each other as well as increase the school culture (Tichenor & Tichenor, 2018; Nicodemus Hans
et al., 2020). Additionally, collaboration leads to the acquisition of new knowledge, collective inquiry, clearer structures, and shared decision-making (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018). It may also help teachers develop social support systems that aid in building a greater understanding of their practices, develop positive attitudes towards each other, establish modeling and cooperation practices, and improve on various aspects of student learning (Naujokaityte & Passey, 2019).

Moreover, collaborative work is also apparent in meeting the diverse needs of every student. In inclusive environments, there is a need for teachers to collaborate with other school professionals, student families, and other teachers. Strong and purposeful collaboration among early childhood teachers and professionals are crucial to positive child and family results and strengthening community trusts through collaboration establishes an inclusive environment and positive course for family and child achievement (Weglarz-Ward et al., 2020). As pressure increases on teachers to meet curriculum demands on their own (Anastasiou & Hajisoteriou, 2020) and with less opportunities to learn from others, this research contributed to understanding how teacher collaborative experiences influence teacher learning and development.

**Research Questions**

Creswell & Poth (2018) state that qualitative research questions are open-ended, developing, and nondirectional. The central research question and sub-questions for this study were designed to examine teachers’ experiences in collaboration related to growing professionally. All participants, with the exception of one, took part in all phases of data collection - the individual interview, one of the focus group discussions, and the questionnaire. During the individual and focus group discussions, the participants were asked the same set of questions. Additional follow up questions were asked to dig deeper into previous answers or to clarify an initial response provided by the participant.
Central Research Question

How do early childhood teachers describe their experiences in collaboration practices related to professional development?

Sub-Question One

How do early childhood teachers collaborate with colleagues to support professional growth?

Sub-Question Two

What are the informal opportunities early childhood teachers have to collaborate and develop professionally?

Sub-Question Three

What are the formal opportunities early childhood teachers have to collaborate/develop professionally?

Definitions

1. *Early Childhood Education* - Early Childhood Education is a service provided in settings that range from formal center-based care, such as childcare programs, preschools, and nursery programs to family/home childcare (Brunsek et al., 2020).

2. *Collaboration* - Collaboration is defined as a process in which individuals work together to improve the total output compared to what they could accomplish on their own (Bush & Grotjohann, 2020).

3. *Professional Development* - Professional Development is activities that develop an individual's skills, knowledge, expertise, and other characteristics as a teacher (Brunsek et al., 2020).
4. *Social Cognitive Theory* - Social Cognitive Theory focuses on group observation and the cognitive or behavior change that can happen from exposure in a social group (Aaron & Blevins, 2020).

**Summary**

Research on teacher professional learning points to collaboration as a crucial component of effective professional development (De Jong et al., 2021). Early childhood teachers’ collaborative practices may be enhanced with probes into the lived contextual experiences. By exploring the practices of teacher collaboration in early childhood as it relates to professional development, this study can contribute to the narrow research of what can be done to improve collaborative practices amongst early childhood teachers thereby improving teaching and learning. The problem is that early childhood teachers are required to participate in professional development that, often, is unrelated to their needs and does not enhance their professional competencies. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to uncover the collaborative practices engaged by early childhood teachers which lead to professional development. Chapter one included an overview of the historical, theoretical, and social contexts linked to teachers developing professionally. Followed by history, the problem, the purpose, the significance of the study, research questions, and definition of terms are included in this study.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Considering how classrooms are constantly changing, teachers must consider the diverse needs of their students in terms of culture, language, family situations, and values that they bring with them to the classroom. Lack of consistency creates a sense of urgency for teachers to expand their knowledge, skills, and practices to meet the demands of the ever-changing environment. Educational researchers have recognized the magnitude of professional development and its impact on teaching and learning and have made efforts to make it an essential component of teacher development. The review of the literature described professional development, job-embedded professional development for EC teachers, and what drives early childhood teachers to translate professional learning to practice. The literature review also revealed the characteristics of effective professional development and professional development formats.

Theoretical Framework

Professional development is allegedly the most effective way to improve teaching quality which translates into increased student achievement (Eun, 2018). Teachers are considered the most important participants in the education process and have the most significant impact on student learning outcomes. The present study followed a theoretical framework developed by Bandura (1986), social cognitive theory, which is used to ground professional development and explains its process and components for learning that might make it effective. The idea of social learning can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle who believed that people learn through observing and imitating models. They explained humans had a natural inclination to do what they see others do. It wasn’t until the 1940’s that Miller and Dollard (1941) challenged the
concept of observational learning. Their beliefs were grounded in behaviorism and asserted that learning occurred when humans observed, imitated, and the observation reinforced. Nonetheless, they were convinced that learning could not occur without imitation and reinforcement (Gibson, 2004).

A variety of social learning theories emerged from Miller and Dollard’s efforts; however, Social cognitive theory (SCT) started as the social learning theory (SLT) in the 1960s by Albert Bandura. It developed into the SCT in 1986 to reflect its emphasis more accurately on both learning and cognition. The theory asserts that learning occurs in a social context with a vital and reciprocal interaction of the person, environment, and behavior (Gibson, 2004). The distinct characteristic of social cognitive theory is the significance of social influence and the importance of internal and external social reinforcement. Social cognitive theory considers how an individual acquires and maintains behavior, while considering the social environment in which the individual carries out the behavior. The theory also factors an individual’s past experiences which will dictate the occurrence of the behavior. Social cognitive theory emphasizes that much of human learning occurs through direct experiences or modeling, observing, and imitating the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others and occurs intentionally or inadvertently. Unlike learning by doing where individuals learn something by performing repeated actions, in observational learning an individual or model can introduce new ways of thinking and behaving concomitantly (Bandura, 1999). There are several historical influences on Bandura's social cognitive theory. Three notable ones are imitation, latent learning, and social learning. Earlier behaviorists maintained differing perspectives on imitation. Some behaviorists (e.g., McDougall, 1926) proposed that people were intuitively inclined to emulate the actions of others, and actions
of others evoked an instinct in observers to replicate those actions. But this notion was dismissed by Watson (1924).

The idea in social cognitive theory described by Stajkovic & Sergeant (2019) is that people are not acquiescent individuals led by unpredictable consequences of their surroundings. To get what they want people make judgments about the reciprocity among the environment, personal factors, and effects of their own behavior. SCT forms ideas of these judgments in terms of triadic, reciprocal, disproportionate influences among the environment, person, and behavior. Within this conceptual framework, people’s beliefs in their self-efficacy are the foundation of human agency. Other factors may serve as guides and motivators, but everything is embedded in the core belief that one can produce effects by one’s actions. If not, there is no motive to persist in difficult situations (Woodcock & Tournaki, 2022). To this end, people are key contributors to their life conditions and not just products of them.

Over the years, there have been numerous debates on whether the causes of human behavior exist within the individual or in the environment. Bandura’s social cognitive theory views human behavior, adaptation and change from an agentic perspective. To be an agent is to influence the quality of one’s performance and the events that affect one’s life, and people's beliefs in their self-efficacy, specifically motivation, are the substructure of human agency (Bandura, 2018). The agentic portion of the social cognitive theory is demonstrated through three dominant features which includes forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. These properties promote self-motivation and guidance, self-regulation, and the metacognitive capability of self-reflection which is claimed to be the most distinct human core feature of agency (Bandura, 2018). In the context of education, Woodcock & Tournaki (2022) suggests that teacher self-efficacy is the beliefs that teachers have of their capacity to express specific teaching
behaviors that shape student outcomes like achievement, interests, and motivation. Similarly, Gordon et al. (2022) believe that high teacher self-efficacy is a gauge of willingness to support, create and execute positive change, persist in challenging situations, be open-minded, and attempt unpredictable teaching strategies. Mahler (2022) considers teachers’ self-efficacy as the cognitive zone of teachers’ motivational angles. The contemplation of information to produce an expectancy of their own efficacy represents the connected cognitive process. A wide consensus exists in the literature that teacher self-efficacy impacts student achievement, and the connection between teacher self-efficacy and student performance has been proven in language, mathematics, science, and social studies (ibid, 2022; Moore & Esselman, 2018). Social cognitive theory suggests several implications for instruction, motivation and learning. According to Schunk & DiBenedetto (2023) learners are active, not passive, seekers and processors of information, and by collaborating in person or interacting with others virtually, people learn new knowledge, skills, beliefs, and viewpoints. However, teachers’ beliefs about collaborative learning may affect how this learning is planned and applied.

**Related Literature**

Many fields demand professionals to engage in ongoing learning or professional development for keeping their current job, maintaining an active license or certification, or simply just staying abreast of the most current practices that allow one to do their job effectively. The field of education is no different. Professional development described by Little (1987) can be any activity planned as a whole or in part to prepare paid staff members for improved performance in present or future positions in the school districts. Education research has supported an adaptation to collaborative school cultures because of their positive outcomes on teaching and learning (Ibrahim, 2020). Collaboration, labeled by Hargreaves & O’Connor
is the new improvement used to increase student achievement, increase teacher retention, and promote the implementation of new ideas and change. Studies have indicated that joint work of collaboration is rooted in the culture of the school and is sustained by expert knowledge and strong collegial relationships where educators care for each other and work in harmony as they commit and complete the challenging work of being a teacher (e.g., Howard, 2019; Ibrahim, 2020; Hargreaves et al., 2018). Schools categorized by a culture with authentic collaboration tend to have better teaching and learning conditions as well as teachers with enhanced professional practice, diminished feelings of loneliness, improved commitment levels, increased relational trust, and improved school outcomes (Ibrahim, 2020). For these reasons, Kolleck, et al. (2021) claims that teacher collaboration is executed as a core principle in various school improvement initiatives, teacher development plans, and policy agendas worldwide.

The body of research supports a core set of features representative of effective professional development which may provide direction for evaluating such programs. Identification of these characteristics dates to Corcoran (1995) and Garet et al. (2001) when reviews merged on the position that the probability of professional development improving student learning was likely when it is sustained, collaborative, has teacher buy-in, is content-specific, leans on external expertise, and is practice-based. Similarly, Guskey (2003) reviewed what makes professional development effective and included activities that enhanced teacher content knowledge, were collaborative in nature, and site based. The literature review conducted by Desimone (2009) offered professional development as a range of activities and interactions that may increase teacher knowledge and skills and enhance their teaching practice as well as add to their personal, social, and emotional growth as educators. The research identified the ongoing development and learning of teachers as an essential element to improving the quality of
schools in the United States. In fact, education reform is often closely associated with teachers’ professional development according to (Sykes, 1996) who also provides two stances which frame the present concern for the professional development of teachers. First, he establishes that teacher learning must be at the core of any effort to improve education because children’s learning relies on teachers’ learning. Second, traditional professional development is regarded as gravely inadequate. However, for many years research on professional development contained mainly recording teacher satisfaction, attitude changes, or commitment to new ideas resulting from professional development instead of the processes by which it worked (Desimone, 2011). Therefore, the knowledge base on what works must be strengthened.

In recent literature on professional development, the picture is even more clear of what teachers need to develop professionally. Akinyemi et al. (2019) studied interventions that were described as ineffective in promoting teachers’ professional growth. She posited that there is a need for interactions and collaboration with others and when teachers collaborate, they have an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through reflection and analysis reforming in action for a specific environment but building it together. Collaborative learning brings out the best in teachers for the purpose of learning and honing pedagogical skills but cannot be accomplished in isolation. Moreover, Zhang et al. (2019) conducted a literature review on professional development and noted that it is the characteristics of PD that make it more feasible for improving teachers’ instructional practice and ultimately for enhancing student outcomes. These features include content focus, coherent structure, extended time, active learning, collaboration, and job-embedded practice. These authors further suggested that one way to investigate PD is to examine teachers’ perceptions of PD activities in which they were engaged
because they have firsthand experiences and interactions within the PD program. Alignment with other reform initiatives, and time and resources were additional characteristics of effective professional development. Many of these studies did not mention or prioritize the importance of utilizing student learning data as a driver to guide professional development efforts.

Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) offers insights about how investing in teaching impacts student outcomes suggesting that the most useful professional development, which can take more than 50 hours of sustained professional learning to realize results, but should include active teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection rather than abstract discussions. More recently, Larsen & McCormick (2021) defined high-quality professional development as ongoing, related to both content knowledge and classroom practice, intended for a specific audience, integrates active learning, incites collaboration, and affords time for practice, feedback, and reflection. A review conducted by Wei et al. (2010) defined high-quality or effective professional development as that which results in improvements in teachers’ knowledge and instructional practice, as well as improved student learning. The review also concluded PD activities that were brief, periodic, or disconnected from practice had little impact on developing instruction or student learning. Although previous research has examined a mix of separate features of effective PD; there is still lack of sufficient evidence disclosing which of these features combined lead to the success of a PD program later. However, there are statistics that show teachers at schools with greater time for peer collaboration were less likely to leave the profession and remain with the organization to help create effective PD opportunities (Grant et al. 2019). In a previous phenomenological study, Hooper et al. (2022) investigated the experiences of five novice ECE teachers in the United States regarding professional development. The participants selected graduated from college within the last two years of the
study, held a Pre-K-3rd grade early childhood teaching certification, and taught Pre-K or kindergarten. A semi-structured interview protocol with seven questions was utilized to learn how these teachers’ perceptions of their professional development experiences intertwined with their personal qualities (e.g., self-efficacy) and the traits of the organization (e.g., available or internal support). In the results, participants named a variety of PD needs including the desire to collaborate with other teachers, additional support to guide student behavior, and wanting more PD unique to their needs. Some reported the necessity to seek out support rather than the support being provided or readily available. All the participants mentioned their appreciation for their team and the desire to work together more. The results also indicated that professional development is never one-sided, and both the school and the teacher’s inclination to learn play a part.

**Teacher Collaboration as a PD Model**

Over the last three decades, extensive research on teacher collaboration has been conducted. Research performed by Hargreaves (2019) acknowledges the change in forms of teacher collaboration with the emergence of more collaborative designs beyond professional learning communities (PLCs) and include collaborative planning, learning walks, instructional rounds, collaborative inquiry, lesson study, school networks, data teams, self-evaluation processes, and peer reviews. Similarly, Muckenthaler et al., (2020) and Garcia-Martinez et al. (2020) and Schuster et al. (2021) examined the benefits of teacher collaboration in correlation with the characteristics of successful schools and collaborative forms. These authors agree that teachers need to develop collaboration skills in order to withstand the changes introduced by current society. Their research also demonstrates that teacher collaboration is key to school improvement, facilitates teacher professionalism, and shows the importance of leadership to
developing appropriate environments for professional discussion and learning interdependently. However, more qualitative studies are needed to explore the issues that encourage or encumber teacher collaboration. To this end, a study conducted by Vangrieken & Kyndt (2019) analyzed how teachers comprehend and value both autonomy and collaboration and the connection between both. The study aimed to recognize different autonomy interpretations including reactive attitude and reflective attitude towards autonomy and assessed how they relate to described levels of collaboration. The focus was on classroom autonomy instead of teacher involvement in decision-making at the school level. To obtain an in-depth understanding of these relationships, multiple design methods were used. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from two independent samples. The first sample consisted of 1610 teachers from 37 schools and 374 different subject groups. The second sample consisted of 1408 teachers from 22 schools and 376 different subject groups. For the qualitative part, 480 teachers agreed to participate in interviews regarding perceptions on autonomy and collaborative attitudes. Regarding autonomy, all teachers stated that pedagogical autonomy was the most important, and four teachers argued that pedagogical autonomy can offset constrained levels of curricular autonomy. In both samples less professional collaboration was described compared to exchanging activities and constructive conflict such as making agreements on the number of grade level assessments or content and use of course materials instead of discussing teaching methods and strategies. Professional collaboration mostly focused on creating assessments or teaching materials. Five teachers stated that they could openly share their opinion and discuss disagreements. However, most times discourse never led to deep-level discussions or constructive negotiations because teachers tended to be protective of their individuality. The qualitative analyses established that the relationship between autonomy and collaboration was
influenced by how teachers understood collaboration. For some teachers, collaboration meant a regular exchange of teaching materials or discussions about content choices. For other teachers, collaboration was thought of as adjusting or aligning what they are doing to what their colleagues are doing. Finally, the results demonstrated that autonomy can be merged with a solitary or collaborative attitude, and that a lot of other factors play a role in the relationship between teachers’ autonomy and inclination to collaborate such as time, colleagues who teach the same grade level, and school structure. Moreover, the interviews showed the significance of autonomy at the collaborative level. The results also revealed the various values teachers placed on top-down enforced versus bottom-up collaboration.

**Principal Leadership and Teacher Collaboration**

Principals are responsible for shaping teachers’ work environments, and in doing so, they can encourage and improve teacher collaboration. They largely define the conditions for collaboration, for example, by fostering an environment of mutual trust, including teachers in decision-making processes, giving time for collaboration, and creating a culture of shared vision and goals (Meyer, et al. 2020). Studies have addressed the relationship between principal leadership and teacher collaboration. Some have concluded that school leaders hold significant influence over teachers’ interactions as they are the ones who establish formal groups and decide which policies or content teachers should discuss. Other findings have shown that principal leadership predicts the quantity and quality of teacher collaboration (e.g., Voelkel, 2019). In a previous study by Lockton (2019), focus was placed on 28 teachers from two schools who had a history of low math scores in comparison to other math teachers from their large urban district. The two schools were selected due to their similarities in size and collaborative composition including formal time set aside for teachers to collaborate. Principals at both schools tried to
organize their teachers’ time to work together to support the school districts’ collaborative reform efforts. During this study, qualitative data were used to examine teachers’ relationships in various collaborative environments, how principals communicate their expectations for collaboration, and teachers’ experiences with informal and formal collaborative experiences. Similarly, Sukru Bellibas et al. (2020), examined the impact of principal leadership on teaching practices in order to expose direct and indirect effects of instructional and distributed leadership models on instructional quality, with the intervening influence of teacher collaboration. The authors suggested that teacher quality is determined by factors beyond teacher qualifications including job satisfaction, collaboration with colleagues, and principal instructional and leadership practices. A further review of the studies indicates that where there was strong leadership practices and teacher collaboration, teachers in these schools worked more closely. The literature review conducted by Desimone (2009) offered professional development as a range of activities and interactions that may increase teacher knowledge and skills and enhance their teaching practice as well as add to their personal, social, and emotional growth as educators. The research identified the ongoing development and learning of teachers as an essential element to improving the quality of schools in the United States. In fact, education reform is often closely associated with teachers’ professional development according to (Sykes, 1996) who also provides two stances which frame the present concern for the professional development of teachers. First, he establishes that teacher learning must be at the core of any effort to improve education because children’s learning relies on teachers’ learning. Second, traditional professional development is regarded as gravely inadequate. However, for many years research on professional development contained mainly recording teacher satisfaction, attitude changes, or commitment to new ideas resulting from professional development instead of the processes by
which it worked (Desimone, 2011). Therefore, the knowledge base on what works must be strengthened.

**Teachers’ Opportunities to Collaborate**

Current research on teacher collaboration in schools focuses on new ways for teachers to share their ideas and expertise about instruction and improve student learning in contrast to traditions of teacher independence. But not all collaboration efforts and or activities are equally effective. Hargreaves & O’Connor (2018) described a sequence of teacher collaborative practices, ranging from simple, sharing of stories, to more intricate ones involving joint efforts to analyze and solve serious issues. It’s easy to adopt a new structure of teacher collaboration, but to implement the new ideal teachers must commission themselves and their colleagues to improve classroom practices collectively over time, building relationships that are exempt from anxiety or judgment. At the same time, some school administrators may be reluctant to adopt a new collaborative structure based out of fear that it might mistakenly induce friction, jealousy, or dissatisfaction among those teachers who seemingly get along. However, Hargreaves & O’Connor posits that if school administrators aim to improve and sustain teaching and improve learning outcomes then they have to get their heads out of the sand and recognize that viable improvement necessitates both solidarity and solidarity among colleagues and ingenious protocols. Similarly, Chen et al. (2018) posits that professional learning occurs when teachers are engrossed in collaborative activities and professional dialogue with other experienced teachers. Through collaborative activities and intentional discourse, with student learning at the core, teachers’ scale up their instructional strategies for improving student learning. The concept of using collaborative activities to impact learning applies to the context of early childhood as well. Education research across age and grade levels unfolds the significance of professional
collaboration for teacher professionalism. Gragg & Collet (2021) found that collaboration throughout the planning and reflecting process for EC teachers was a dynamic tool for professional learning, improving professional identity as well. In a previous study, Nordgren et al. (2021) examined early childhood teachers' perceptions of their working conditions for lesson planning and preparation focusing on collegial collaboration and routine and formative teaching through a lesson study. The study was based on data collected via a questionnaire targeting teachers’ preparation and planning as part of school structuring and the prospects of collegial collaboration. It included a stratified sample of 4988 individuals which was drawn to get a representative sample of 46% (n=2285). Two of four themes in the questionnaire specifically addressed teachers’ opportunities to plan and evaluate lessons with their colleagues as well as how often a pedagogical model is used for teacher development. A composite measure was constructed to measure different aspects of teacher collaboration. Seventy percent of the participants were females, and the difference were males. The participants’ ages ranged between 21 and 64 years, with the mean age being 47.6 years (SD = 10.2 years). Most of the participants were employed in municipal schools (81%) and the remainder in independent schools, 72% worked in compulsory schools, and 28% in upper secondary schools. On average, the participants had 16 years (SD = 9.7 years) of experience working as teachers (range = 1–43 years). The study resulted in about one-third of the teachers stated having scheduled meetings for planning lessons on a weekly basis. Consistently scheduled time to analyze teaching was just as scant. Even when the time was scheduled, it was typically not used for creating tasks and exercises for future lessons. The overall pattern revealed that more than half of the teachers almost never attended collegial planning and preparation meetings and that assessing or forming tasks was not a regular exercise when the teachers were provided with time for collaboration.
Moreover, teachers reported that they were more satisfied with planning and preparing lessons the more time that was scheduled for collegial work. They were delighted to think deeply and build trust with their colleagues as they engaged in the exercise of developing practice.

**Collaborative Learning Is Job-Embedded**

In a national survey conducted by Garet et al. (2001) teachers disclosed that their knowledge and skills grew, and their practice changed when they participated in PD that was well-organized, focused on content knowledge, and collaborative. The hands-on tasks that enhanced teachers’ knowledge of the content and how to teach it yielded a sense of success when the content was aligned with the curriculum. In job-embedded professional development teachers learn during the normal school day. JEPD is reform-based professional development in which the most of teacher learning takes place in schools. Research in the last two decades indicates how schools can create more impactful professional development experiences and that these experiences will be, in large, shaped by collaborative activities teachers take part in. In a previous study, Doppenberg et al. (2012) investigated 411 primary school teachers’, from 49 primary schools, perceptions concerning collaborative teacher learning within contexts that had various focuses of collaboration in terms of a variety of learning activities and learning results. The aim was to learn the frequency that collaborative learning activities occurred within three different contexts as well as the perceived learning outcomes. For teachers working in the same school, the study found that the exchange and joint work activities occurred often with an above average score of 5.32 and 4.18, respectively, which is above the possible value of 4. Moreover, scoring below the average of 4 at 3.35 and 1.88 were the learning activities intervision and collegial support. For learning outcomes, the medium scores of 3.28 and 3.45 for *individual learning* and *shared learning*, and 2.81 for collegial learning. Consequently, differences between
schools in teachers’ perceived learning activities and learning outcomes were 48% and 50%, respectively, for the frequent occurrences of *exchange* and *joint work* activities were to a large degree contingent upon the school in which the teachers worked. Smaller differences resulted between schools for the learning activities intervision and collegial support at 11% and 19%. Moreover, the biggest variance between schools were found for *individual learning* outcomes with 13% of the variance present at the school level. Additionally, *shared learning* and *collegial learning* 6% and 3% of the variance was detected at the school level. Hence, the results revealed that the perceived learning outcomes insignificantly varied between schools, and that distinctions were relative to individual teachers within schools. Moreover, a major conclusion is that differences in teachers’ perceived activities and perceived learning outcomes varied to a significant degree between different focuses of collaboration. Additionally, the variations between focuses of collaboration demonstrates that differences in teachers' perceived activities and outcomes between schools are related to differences between focuses. Lastly, the findings showed that the frequency of occurrence of the learning activities *exchange*, and *joint work* varied to a large degree between schools and that the focus of collaboration had a considerable effect on these activities.

In a quantitative case study, Althauser (2015) investigated the impact of a district-wide, job-embedded professional development program on teachers’ general and personal explored the effects of collaborative job-embedded PD for K-5 teachers. The authors sought to understand how teachers perceived their experiences of planning interdisciplinary lessons on the job with their peers and how teachers viewed teaching their own designed plans to test the lessons’ effectiveness. The study found that 50-86% of participants said that collaborating with peers helped out with their critical thinking, lesson planning, and time management. Similarly, in a
cross-case study, de Jong et al. (2019) documented and examined the meetings of five teacher groups, a total of 20 teachers across three schools, who met to expand their differentiated teaching in a short-term collaboration initiative. The aim was to understand collaboration in teacher groups, given their teacher qualities and the school context in which the teachers work. The study revealed four distinguishing classifications for teacher collaboration; sharing experiences; sharing ideas; advising; and sharing materials. The study found that short-term teacher collaboration initiatives depend on the previous existence of collaborative cultures; teacher collaboration can impose traditional views about teaching where lack of internal and external support exists; and both, more and less, intensive collaboration can have learning possibilities for teachers depending on teachers’ needs and school context. In a previous study, Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2009) observed and documented the activities of 36 special education teachers. The study found that special education teachers spent an average of 12% of their day on paperwork, 15% of their time was consumed on instructional support, and 16% of their day was spent on academic instruction (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2009). The study also noted that for certain teachers, paperwork was extreme, and they spent nearly 50% of their day completing it (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2009).

Job-embedded professional development (JEPD) refers to teacher learning that is established in day-to-day teaching practice and is devised to enhance teachers’ content knowledge and instructional practice with the purpose of improving student learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). Moreover, they further state that high quality JEPD also is aligned with state standards and school improvement goals. Similarly, Zhang, et al. (2021) identified core features that signify effective professional development and include content focus, clear structure, active learning, collaboration, and is job embedded.
Further, Putnam & Borko (2000) pointed to the need for more involved participation than is normally offered in the conventional workshop given at the onset of an initiative. They argue that teachers’ professional development is a result of formal and informal social interactions among teachers that occur in context. If executed and supported effectively, these forms of professional learning could potentially be conducive to the development of all teachers within a team or school by fostering conversations among the teachers about tangible acts of instruction and student learning within their own school (Wei et al., 2009). Collaborative learning activities such as mentoring; coaching; joint lesson planning; peer observation; action research; as well as professional learning communities can stimulate teachers’ professional learning or more so student achievement (Bach et al., 2020). Moreover, others contend that these types of activities are likely to be more effective because they are often guided by other classroom teachers who are considered a trusted point of reference for making instructional improvements (Penuel et al., 2007). In a multi-level case study, Levine & Marcus (2010) observed and recorded the nature of collaborative activities of 7 teachers, five general educators, one special education teacher, one resource specialist, and one principal. The study found that the structure and focus of collaborative activity affected the quantity and nature of teachers' opportunities for learning. The study also offered descriptions of similarities and differences within and across different types of meetings to support the notion that purposeful choices about structure and focus both assist and restrict what teachers can learn from access to colleagues’ practices.

**Early Childhood Education**

According to Abenavoli (2019), early childhood education (ECE) programs have proven to yield immediate favorable results on children’s cognitive abilities, learning capacity, and social-emotional skills. Hence the reason these programs have progressively gained
accreditation, whereby services are assessed based on their adherence to predetermined standards. Early childhood educators’ work has increasingly required the operation of a holistic view of the child, whose every act is observed, recorded, and evaluated (Sims & Brettig, 2018). Moreover, the consensus among researchers is that early childhood education (ECE) can have positive effects on children’s school readiness by the conclusion of the program (Abenavoli, 2019; Joo et al., 2019; Jenson & Wurtz Rasmussen, 2018). Children from different backgrounds and specifically those from lower socioeconomic settings who attended high-quality early childhood programs enter kindergarten more academically prepared. When children enter ECE programs as early as 3-years-old could further educational growth as a 4-year-old; however, if later educational opportunities fail or cease to build on prior achievement/gains then the earlier exposure would be deemed a lost opportunity (Ansari et al., 2019). There is also evidence suggesting that there are long-term benefits of attending high-quality ECE programs. Fewer students are retained and placed in special education, and there seems to be higher high school graduation rates among those students who participated in high-quality ECE programs (Aguiar & Aguiar, 2020). Therefore, engaging early childhood teachers in effective professional development is a crucial component of high-quality early childhood education programs.

Collaboration in Early Childhood Programs

Young children are a big deal for schools today. Mounting evidence about the benefits of early childhood education has motivated thousands of school districts to offer preschool. Research on the foundations of literacy has spurred greater identification of reading disorders in kindergarten, and knowledge about how students develop over time is driving efforts to align early childhood and the elementary grades. In striving towards the goal of improving learning outcomes for all children, the early childhood education sector has invested substantially in
efforts to improve the quality of instruction in early childhood classrooms and has established policies regarding PD for early childhood education (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Research on early childhood PD shows that learning experiences are not equally effective at improving teacher knowledge and practice or increasing student outcomes. Scholars on early childhood professional development (Zaslow et al., 2010; Howes et al., 2012; Baker, 2018) have proposed professional development practices specific to early childhood teachers. Six qualities of effective PD for EC teachers which include opportunities to connect knowledge and practice, teacher collaboration, timely and frequent PD sessions, includes assessment strategies, and organizational structure alignment and learning standards. Similarly, according to Daniels et al. (2019), the following seven elements are part of effective PD for any teacher: content focused, active learning, collaboration, modeling, coaching and expert support, feedback and reflection, and sustainability. Schachter (2019) posits that professional development for early childhood teachers can be hit or miss due to the development and design of PD which are often misaligned, and although PD endeavors are costly for EC programs and teachers, still, the focus of professional development should be on its individual components to ensure high-quality PD experiences. More importantly, he states that to select high quality professional development it is important to consider two essential components of PD - the content and the format. Darling-Hammond (1995) suggests that traditional ideas of in-service training or dissemination should be replaced by opportunities to share expertise based on authentic conditions. In this environment, teachers would share their knowledge, discuss, and connect with new ideas and strategies based on their own unique circumstances. Learning in context was later supported by Schachter (2019) who emphasized that single training, focused on knowledge building, has shown to have little success in supporting changes in instructional practice. Similarly, Clarke, et al. (2020) agrees
that workshops enhance teachers’ familiarity and awareness of the topic, while more rigorous and job-embedded PD is needed to support successful application in the classroom. A research review conducted by Stavholm (2021) on teacher professional learning leans towards the importance of permitting PD programs to be collaborative, collegial, and sustainable in addition to taking place on the job. In line with these discoveries, coaching, professional learning communities (PLCs), and peer observations have surfaced as other ways of providing sustainable support to teachers’ professional learning. A grounded study conducted by Larsen & McCormick (2021) added how professional learning opportunities that included coaching and PLCs supported teachers in developing professional responsibility, and a rising sense of autonomy and curricular control. Later, Mowrey & King (2019) explored the patterns of collaboration among 68 public preschool educators in order to understand the extent to which collaborative opportunities exist for early childhood practitioners, either formally or informally, within and across sites and the degree to which work environment factors facilitate or constrain such collaborations. The study consisted of 37 lead teachers, 21 assistant teachers, and 10 individuals who were identified as other staff or behavior specialists. The study revealed that there were mixed patterns in opportunities for collaboration within sites or across sites. Many participants reported collaboration with teachers (77.1%), assistants (70%), and principal (47.1%). Only 14.3% reported any collaboration efforts with other staff or specialists within the site. The most common setting for these collaborative experiences were informal face-to-face dialogue (85.7%), staff meetings (75.7%), professional learning communities (64.3%), and email interactions (50%) within the site. Similarly, more participants described their collaborative opportunities as informal: sharing resources (90%), informal conversations (88.6%), troubleshooting (85.7%), data analysis (67.1%), program review (47.1%), learning program changes (54.3%), or
professional development (57.1%). The most common collaborative activities that occurred across sites were staff and program meetings (Mowrey & King, 2019).

**Coaching**

Research on early childhood professional development points out that PD experiences are not equally effective at increasing teacher knowledge, fostering teacher pedagogy, or improving child outcomes. Elek and Page (2018) point out that coaching as a professional development strategy in early childhood leads to improved instruction and improved learning. To prove this notion, research conducted by Taylor et al. (2021) offers guidance on creating and selecting PD for early childhood teachers that focus on quality content and formats. The aim of the study was to investigate PD and coaching and obtain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of the support ECEs receive in their work with preschool children. The study included nine early childhood educators (ECEs) an opportunity to share their experiences about the support they receive from mentors and evaluators (M/Es) as well as additional support needed to be successful. The study highlights the use of an alternative model such as coaching, which has been growing steadily, for supporting teachers’ continuing education. The study used a convenience sampling method and targeted participants who (a) had acquired or were working towards licensure, (b) were enrolled in a support program for beginning teachers, (c) responded to a survey, (d) worked in a private early childhood center, (e) had a provisional license, and (f) were active participants in a local organization that supports early childhood educators. The research examined supports provided to them by the local program that assisted beginning teachers. The study revealed many ECEs had positive comments regarding their M/E responsiveness; more teacher-to-teacher interactions; and more opportunities for individualized guidance with specific feedback from M/Es. Coaching is one way to provide individualized and
ongoing professional development that has the potential to improve both teaching and learning, and usually requires an experienced teacher providing ongoing support for a teacher to learn or hone specific skills to support students’ learning according to Elek & Page (2018). However, they continue to state that despite the wide support for coaching as a PD format that improves instruction, unanimity is lacking on how to define coaching as a form of PD, what it looks like, and how it should be offered. Further, Lofthouse (2018) suggests that coaching in an educational setting can be passive or active and takes on many forms with collaborative work among the participants being at the forefront of professional development efforts. Schacter et al. (2019) highlight several benefits of coaching as a professional development strategy including opportunities for peer observations, individualized feedback on their instructional practices, improved self-reflection, and more positive changes in teacher practices and student outcomes.

Increasingly, coaching is being utilized as an essential tool for improving ECE practices and is considered an essential component of EC professional learning across federal and state organizations in the US; however, the evidence supporting the effectiveness of coaching that results in improvement in teaching and learning varies (Quality Compendium 2019). Given the increased use of coaching and the vagueness around coaching effectiveness, a group of researchers sought to investigate the work of EC coaches in the Midwestern part of the US. In this study, Schacter et al. (2022) examined the experiences of early childhood coaches in a variety of real-world coaching scenarios and the practices (structure, processes, and data collection) that contribute to its success. Ninety-one participants recruited via snowball sampling and self-identifying as EC coaches participated in the study. They coached in 12 formal initiatives relating to children’s social emotional development and targeted instruction. Sixty-eight percent had at least 10 years of experience in an early childhood setting in a single state.
While 8.8% had more than 15 years of coaching experience in several states. The data combined qualitative and quantitative results. The most repeatedly targeted content was social emotional development and behavior management, in which coaches stated educators requested more support in the latter. STEM and creative arts received the least attention. The data also revealed that almost all coaches (94.5%) met, in person, with their educators one-on-one to provide feedback or set goals, which was the most common format used during the initiatives, while email and texting were used between bimonthly and 2-3 months lasting between 0 and 15 minutes. Further, for 67% of coaches, the coaching period lasted for multiple years, 18.7% during a school year, 7.7% one calendar year, and 4.4% for six months or less. Importantly, nearly 55% of participants described coaching as a tool for developing teacher capacity to maintain, utilize, or learn new practices. In regard to the coaching processes, participants-maintained logs or information was collected by an evaluator regarding their coaching practices. Sixty-eight percent of coaches stated their coaching processes worked most of the time. About 21.9% thought their coaching worked half of the time. While 11% reported their coaching worked sometimes. Despite the perceived effectiveness of coaching 67% of the participants noted the most rewarding aspect of coaching was recognizing improvement in teacher practices. Moreover, the study concluded highlighting crucial elements of coaching needed to be effective including better supportive structures within early childhood, ideas to bring effective coaching to scale to impact teaching and learning and more learning opportunities to reach the full potential of coaching in an EC setting.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

The birth of PLCs in an educational setting has been acknowledged as a notable development toward enhancing the quality of learning and teaching by fostering shared values
and expectations among teachers to improve student outcomes. Wai-Yan Wan (2021) defines a professional learning community as a group of people working together and learning from each other during systematic and collaborative professional development activities. While Wai-Yan Wan suggested five dimensions of PLCs: shared and supportive leadership, shared values and visions, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions, other researchers argued that PLCs have 12 dimensions, relating mostly to PLC essentials and less of the process. The 12 dimensions include shared values and vision; collective responsibility for pupils’ learning; collaboration focused on learning; professional learning: individual and collective; reflective professional enquiry; openness, networks, and partnerships; inclusive membership; mutual trust, respect, and support; optimizing resources and structures; promoting individual and collective professional learning; evaluating and sustaining a PLC; and leading and managing the PLC (Wai-Yan Wan, 2021). An exploratory study conducted by Wai-Yan investigated the connection between teachers’ perceptions of PLCs and their differentiated instructional practices. Three primary schools, 121 teachers derived from a convenience sampling method, participated in the study. The teachers submitted surveys referencing their perceptions on how participating in PLCs impact their ability to differentiate instruction. Nearly 70% of the teachers surveyed had received previous training on how to differentiate, and more than 40% of teachers surveyed had 16-23 years of experience. The survey was composed of three parts. The first part addressed teachers’ perceptions of PLCs, the second part regarded differentiated instructional practice, and the third part required demographic information from the participants. The findings identified three dimensions of PLC engagement including student learning, reflective dialogue, and shared and supportive leadership. The overall PLC engagement using 19 items revealed Cronbach’s α=.93 which demonstrated a good internal consistency.
Teachers had the highest mean score in Component 1 - Collective Focus on Student Learning (M = 4.89, SD = .49). The lowest mean score was in Component 3 - Shared and Supportive Leadership (M = 4.17, SD = .68). Moreover, the researchers of the study implied that teachers’ PLC engagement was firmly connected with differentiated instruction practice with a mean score of 4.70 (SD = .53). The implication is the more teachers were engaged in PLCs, the more differentiated their instruction teachers employed. The low PLC engagement group for differentiated instruction practice (M = 4.25, SD = .63). The study emphasizes the importance of understanding teachers’ PLC engagement, as well as providing a clearer understanding of how PLC engagement is believed to encourage differentiated instruction practices to meet the needs of all students.

Studies on professional learning communities in early childhood are few. Nonetheless, the existing studies have consistently noted the possible advantages of implementing well-developed PLCs at schools and how some teachers take on the role of leaders within the professional learning environment to enhance their pedagogy. Teachers’ times together during PLCs should be framed by the use of protocols to ensure focused, intentional conversation and dialogue about student work and student learning (Fichtman Dana et al. (c2011). In a previous study, Avidov-Ungar et al. (2021) observed and documented the experiences of 30 early childhood teachers’ perceptions of their leadership role in professional learning communities (PLCs) over the course of four months. The leadership role involved organizing group meetings and creating the content for each gathering. The aim of the study was to examine the factors that prompted early childhood teachers to accept a leadership role in professional learning communities (PLCs) and their perceptions of the role and the implications of assuming additional duties beyond their normal teaching assignment. The study revealed two central
reasons that affected early childhood educators’ decisions to perform as PLC leaders: internal motivations and external motivations. Some participants described only internal motivations (n=23); other participants described only external motivations (n=7), whereas others referred to both types of motivations (n=5). Overall, the teachers viewed this leadership role as an opportunity for meaningful professional development, and while devoted to an important goal teachers exchange individuality and autonomous decision making with collegial collaboration. Therefore, a thorough and multidimensional PLC concept was developed for research on PLCs (Huijboom et al., 2018). In a case study design, Cherrington & Thornton (2015) sought to understand the intricate nature of PLCs and how they develop within the early childhood division. The study included a total of four PLC groups, two whole-center PLCs and two PLCs composed of clusters of pairs of teachers from several centers were established and monitored over a 10-month period. The study found that trust is an important component of productive PLCs as well as teacher voice. It also suggested that teachers learning together produced a formidable community, improved collective decision making, increased reflective practice, and a greater sense of teamwork.

The use of professional learning communities is considered a promising strategy for enhancing professional learning (Prenger et al., 2018). During PLC time teachers are expected to constantly increase their own professional expertise as well as improve the profession with the added expectation of increasing student learning. Teachers of young children are being held accountable for the policies, programs and practices they implement, and therefore, early childhood teachers must have the capacity to make educated decisions and be deliberate about recording and assessing their efforts (Damjanovic & Blank, 2021). As demand increases for early childhood teachers, the appeal for professional development that supports teachers’ abilities
to carefully inspect their practice and make sound instructional judgements has become more pressing. Different researchers (Brodie, 2019 and Prenger et al, 2018) have utilized five interconnected variables to describe the PLC concept. First, reflexive dialogue in which teachers discuss relevant educational topics. Second, teacher observation whereby teachers observe each other’s classes with the aim of receiving feedback for improvement. Third, collaboration where teachers engage with each other during PLC time, sharing leadership. Fourth, shared goals in which teachers agree with the PLC’s goals and the school’s vision, and lastly, collective focus on student learning. The concept of PLCs underscores the importance of continuous professional learning within bold and complicated systems.

To further develop the concept of utilizing PLCs as professional development some experts argue that schools need to institute the processes and practices as learning organizations with PLCs at the helm if they are to create situations that improve and sustain teacher and student learning (Admiraal, et al. (2019). In this environment people continually learn how to learn together and constantly enlarge their capacity to get the results they want. In their study Admiraal, et al. (2019), investigated strategies and interventions schools used to develop into a learning community to foster teacher learning. Attention was set on rebuilding their professional learning culture in which teacher collaboration is deliberately rooted in teachers constructing, implementing, and learning about teaching. The study included 14 secondary schools over the course of three years. Each school received state funding to aid in the set up and increase activities that help support the school as a PLC. Five clusters: shared school vision on learning included activities that aimed to develop an explicit school vision; professional learning opportunities for all included activities that aim to promote learning opportunities offered in school or outside school; collaborative work and learning included various activities that aim to
promote teacher collaboration and bridge teachers’ work and professional development; change of school organization included activities that aimed to change how PD and meetings were organized; and learning leadership included activities that builds leadership of school leaders or team leaders. were used as criteria to determine the current culture of professional collaboration in each school and the necessary interventions aimed to expand the development of the school culture and promote professional learning opportunities. The study revealed interventions directed at teacher-leaders, team leaders and school principals were infrequent. Interventions categorized as professional learning opportunities and collaborative work and learning were the items constantly mentioned. Peer observation and review were too arduous to organize and too challenging to sustain but was improved by including it in teachers’ yearly individual meetings which did not fare well with teachers. It can be concluded that the interventions to reform and sustain PLCs were valued more for their connection between work and learning. The more embedded an intervention is in an organization and culture, the bigger the impact it has, driving schools towards a culture of professional collaboration.

The main objectives in building professional learning communities are to improve teachers’ professionalism and well-being, and create positive impacts on student learning (Antti Luoma, et al. 2018). It is the question of changing the culture and understanding how PLCs should function. The culture of a school is one of PLCs essential characteristics and it could be inconspicuous, intentional or unintentional, positive or negative. PLCs provide a system for teachers to encourage collaborative learning to enhance their own practice through productive dialogue and joint practice resulting in improved student outcomes (Battersby, 2019). The author continues to state that it can be challenging to build and manage an effective PLC, specifically one that results in sustained teaching reforms.
The development of teachers’ instructional practices is especially important for kindergarten education, where teachers play a key role in helping children attain a balance of intellectual, physical and socio-emotional development as a support for life. How confident kindergarten teachers are about their professional competence will impact children’s learning. In order to gain a thorough understanding of teachers’ experiences in a PLC, Damjanovic & Blank (2020) conducted a qualitative case study utilizing an existing university lab preschool. The study included three preschool teachers with three to five years of teaching experience in a preschool setting. Data was collected over a four-month period and included notes from teacher interviews, observations during the PLC meetings, and the classroom documentation teachers shared during the sessions. Complication of teachers forming a professional identity and developing a shared practice in the context of the PLC was disclosed in the study. Teachers based their sense of belonging in the group on their role within the school and the other teachers included in the group itself. Participation in the PLC seemed to reinforce the teachers’ identities as professionals distinctively. For Teacher 1, an assistant teacher, being included in the PLC made her feel she was an equal and an essential part of the school community. Her identity seemed to hinge on her involvement within the group which seemed to improve her classroom engagement. Participating in the PLC allowed Teacher 2 to serve as a mentor and was considered herself to be the team leader and other members saw her in the same light. For Teacher 3, inclusion in the PLC allowed plenty of latitude to share her classroom experiences with her colleagues. Meeting together with colleagues to share similar triumphs and victories was important to her. The idea of belonging to a PLC was extremely important to the teachers because it made them feel motivated and qualified them as a professional.
**Peer Observations**

Evidence is emerging that the process of observing is just as valuable, if not more, than being observed and given feedback. Peer observation of teaching is a process when one teacher watches another in their classroom with the main purpose of learning about teaching strategies through that observational experience. Peer observation has also led to self-reported improvements in teaching practice, increased confidence, and self-reflection (Hendry et al., 2021). The authors continued to note that peer observations lead to organizational benefits by improving collegial culture, strengthening relationships, and disseminating effective teaching methods. However, means to measure the effectiveness of any teacher continues to develop. Ridge & Lavigne (2020) note that more schools are turning to high stakes testing as a way to measure teacher effectiveness, assess teacher practice, and make professional decisions. Additionally, schools strive to ensure effective teachers for all students by improving instruction through some form of feedback. One source of feedback most utilized, particularly in the United States, is administrator-to-teacher feedback, while another practice is peer-to-peer feedback which is underutilized but considered to be helpful for some teachers. In a previous study, Visone (2019), sought to explore teachers’ insights about peer observations during class visits (CVs) as a professional learning tool, if CVs aligned with present-day professional learning expectations, how and if CVs affected social capital and what circumstances amplified or detracted from the execution of CVs. The overarching themes found were enhancing conditions, detracting conditions, and impacts. Regarding enhancing conditions, which included theoretical and logistical aspects, the study found that teachers desired to be their best individually and collectively, they shared a desire to learn from each other no matter the years of experience, and collective ownership of student outcomes increased. The logistical results of CV implementation
included teachers’ input to sculpt the process continued during implementation, a detailed schedule was offered, and aligning professional development with district and school goals. The theoretical and logistical detractors for the implementation of CVs resulted in having to overcome anxiety from teacher visits, open to the possibility of criticism, competing school priorities, and the teachers’ need to leave their own classrooms. Further, the results also included tangible and human capital impacts from CVs. Most comments revealed positive impacts on individual and group learning with improvement in instruction following the peer observations. Further, teachers stated they saw the benefits of CVs. Teachers stated they were able to get and implement ideas to better support their own development, were able to see practices in action instead of simply discussing them and were able to witness the strengths of their colleagues. Overall, with the potential advantages mentioned, there were implications of collective accountability due to engagement in peer observations.

Conversely, Hendry et al. (2020) found factors to be critical to the success of a peer observation protocol in that peer viewers often provide only positive feedback thus limiting any benefits to be gained from constructive criticism. Teachers learning from each other can be effective and promising. The demand for professional learning to be job embedded (Visone, 2019; Garet et al. 2001; Penuel et al. 2007) means that value has been placed on teacher learning and should be connected to what they do daily. The idea of teachers learning from each other through peer observation is a natural extension of job embedded PD because it can occur during school hours. Subsequently, peer observation can result in more learning that is active and ongoing and serves as another learning mechanism to help teachers recognize their own successes and increase their teacher self-efficacy (Visone, 2019).
Summary

Professional development is an effective practice to maintain and increase teacher effectiveness in numerous domains (Daniel, 2019). It is even more important that the elements of PD that impact early childhood teachers’ participation with PD content are better understood. Professional development often targets teachers’ acceptance of developmentally appropriate beliefs and practices to promote more positive teacher-child interactions and thus better outcomes for young children. Although the success of professional development for early childhood educators has been questionable, evidence is growing that indicates PD in early childhood education is most effective when it is focused on the what of specific practices and when it is through the how of continuous support (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2021). The associations of beliefs and practices with experiences of professional development for early childhood teachers have been less often examined in the literature despite the potential impact of professional development on teachers’ beliefs and practices; this is one of the gaps addressed by the study. The value the study brought is the improvement of the implementation fidelity of professional development based on EC teachers' perceptions of their PD collaborative experiences. Furthermore, PD will improve the value teachers place on participation with different models of PD and the connection to their practices.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine early childhood teachers’ collaborative experiences relating to developing professionally. At this stage in the research, factors that lead to teacher learning from collaborative experiences were generally defined as the supports such as coaching, peer observations, and professional learning communities, and how these supports impacted teacher learning experiences. The theory that guided this study was Bandura’s 1986 social cognitive theory which posits that humans have the capacity for observational learning that enables them to develop their knowledge and skills from information conveyed by modeling influences (Bandura, 1986). While collaboration is an essential component to enhance student learning there have been studies about the enhancement of its effectiveness on teacher learning and how it translates into actual classroom practices. (Samaranayaka et al., 2018). Chapter three contained an in-depth discussion of the data collection process involving multiple sources including observations, individual, and face-to-face interviews. The case study was an appropriate design when analyzing and comparing multiple early childhood educators’ experiences with professional development within the same school district. Further, this chapter included the participant accessibility process, a description of the population demographics and sampling strategies. Details supporting multiple data collection methods and data analysis techniques was provided according to case study practices along with the interview and focus group questions explanations.

Research Design

The qualitative case-study approach was appropriate because it provided an understanding of a real phenomenon experienced by teachers and focused on the perspectives of
multiple participants. Furthermore, the process generated a holistic picture of the phenomenon studied and an interpretation of how the researcher’s background influenced the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research broadly refers to a category of research approaches that produce findings without reliance on quantitative measurement or statistical analysis (Hamilton & Finley, 2019). The study employed a qualitative case study method and approach as an appropriate means of examining teachers’ experiences with various forms of collaboration and interactions within context. The use of a case study approach allowed the researcher to understand how the participants interpret and embrace their experiences in collaborative opportunities and how they make sense of their learning. The goal of the study was to gain an understanding of early childhood educators collaborative experiences related to developing professionally. Qualitative research in education, as described by Creswell & Poth (2018), affords researchers the opportunity to collect data in the environment where participants experience the phenomenon. During the data collection process, the researcher collected and reviewed multiple sources of evidence including data from individual interviews, focus group discussions, and a questionnaire.

The case study approach included the expressions of the participants, the self-examination of the researcher, a lucid description and interpretation of the problem and how the new discoveries will contribute to the existing literature (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study utilized data triangulation as a key component of the design to provide a rich contextual description of the case (Smith, 2018). Further, qualitative case studies warrant researchers to conduct an in-depth study of a situation that is observed in a specific context. Case studies require the use of various data sources including face-to-face interviews, document review, focus group interviews, and analysis of data through a myriad of lenses to disclose multiple dimensions
of the phenomenon (Rashid et al., 2019). Case studies allow researchers to conduct an in-depth analysis of a case while retaining a holistic and real-world viewpoint about individual and small group behavior, organizational and managerial processes, environmental changes, school performance, international relations, and industry improvements (Yin, 2018).

The history of the case study design is well established. Creswell & Poth (2018), trace the origins of modern science case studies through anthropology and sociology back to Hamel et al. (1993) and mentioned Malinowski’s study of the Trobriand Islands, French sociologist LePlay’s study of families, and the case studies of the University of Chicago from the 1920s and 1930s through the 1950s as antecedents of qualitative case study research. Currently, some rely on Yin’s (2018) features of the case study approach that espouses both qualitative and quantitative approaches in the development of a case.

A single instrumental case study design was chosen for this research because the study was bounded by specific parameters, and took place in a naturalistic setting, during a specific time, involved multiple participants, and addressed a real-life situation in progress (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Informal and formal ways teachers collaborate in three early childhood schools in Central New Jersey that contribute to their professional growth was examined. A qualitative case study approach supports the examination of early childhood educators’ collaborative experiences to help them develop professionally. Qualitative relies on data that are observed or measured to investigate questions about the sample population. Using a qualitative method was the best choice because it allowed for a more thorough examination of teachers’ experiences and their thoughts about the types of collaborative opportunities afforded them to aid their professional development.
Research Questions

Teacher collaboration can be understood as joint teamwork in all group activities that is required to perform a shared task (de Jong, et al 2022). The extensive research previously done on teacher collaboration demonstrates it is still essential to further examine the elements that foster teacher collaborative experiences as a means to counter isolation, improve teacher practice and enhance professional growth. Four research questions guided this qualitative case study to understand early childhood teachers’ perspectives on how collaborative experiences and practices contribute to their professional growth.

Central Research Question

How do early childhood teachers describe their experiences in collaboration practices related to professional development?

Sub-Question One

How do early childhood teachers collaborate with colleagues to support professional growth?

Sub-Question Two

What are the informal opportunities early childhood teachers have to collaborate and develop professionally?

Sub-Question Three

What are the formal opportunities early childhood teachers have to collaborate/develop professionally?

Setting and Participants

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers’ experiences in collaboration in regard to growing professionally in three early childhood schools in Central New Jersey. Early
childhood educators shared their feelings, thoughts, and perceptions about the PD opportunities offered to them and if any of these experiences reinforced or sustained their current position.

**Setting**

The setting for this study included three early childhood preschools in Central New Jersey that serve children from the age of three to six years old. The setting comprises 66 classrooms, twelve inclusion classes, 10 special needs classes, 44 general education classrooms, 44 general education teachers and instructional assistants, three in-class support staff, three preschool intervention referral specialist (PIRS), three instructional coaches, and a host of members on the child study team. The setting was chosen because of the potential availability of all early childhood teachers located in the city which employs some form of collaborative learning practices within the school program.

The population of Long Beach consists of 30,241 residents with racial demographics as follows: 67% white, 16% Black, 30.3% Hispanic or Latino, 0.1% American Indian, 1.5% Asian, 2.6% two or more races (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The organizational structure of each childhood setting included one principal, teachers, one instructional assistant per teacher, administrative staff, preschool intervention referral specialist (PIRS), an instructional coach, a guidance counselor, a social worker, a nurse, and a speech therapist. Collaboration and interactions among teachers can cause changes in pedagogical learning and improve outcomes for teachers and students (Lockton, 2018). The findings contributed to existing research and could be used to inform decision makers in building collaborative cultures that offer teachers additional opportunities to formally and informally interact and develop professionally.
Participants

Using a purposive sample, participants in this study were early childhood teachers with a minimum of one year teaching experience in an early childhood setting. All early childhood educators in the state are required to have at least a bachelor’s degree from a regionally accredited institution in early childhood education and pass the exam which certifies them to be an early childhood classroom teacher (State of NJ Department of Education). Instead of using a convenience sample, the purposive sampling method was used to intentionally sample a group based on the researchers’ judgment about which participants will be most informed (Moser & Kortstjens, 2018). The sample size consisted of 12 early childhood educators who teach preschool and kindergarten children with a minimum of one year experience. A mixed sample of female teachers of different ages, ethnicities, and years of experience was included. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality of all participants. After the approval for teacher participants was granted from the school district leader, the researcher utilized the district’s routing sheets to contact all early childhood educators via email to secure 10-15 participants for the study. The initial email included a recruitment letter which outlines the reason for the contact, purpose, participant expectations, the study process, and a survey with questions regarding the teachers’ professional experience. Once the survey responses were received 12 persons from the pool of eligible participants were selected. Then the researcher contacted the participants via a phone call to explain the next steps.

Researcher Positionality

I serve as an Early Childhood Principal at an early childhood preschool in an urban school district in Central New Jersey. In the district, there are 1076 students enrolled in PreK and kindergarten. My personal connection to the topic on professional development is two-fold. First,
I served in the classroom for nearly 18 years on various levels and now as a school principal. As a teacher, I had to participate in mostly mandatory PD sessions that did not always leave me with the best experiences. The subject matter was often irrelevant, untimely, and rarely followed up with time to collaborate. But over time, I learned to extract what I could from the experience in the hopes that the information would be applicable to the classroom sometime soon. The most engaging PD was the hands-on, group discussions and interactions that were associated with my grade level and topic of interest. Now, as a school principal, a lot of the PD we offer is either district mandated or only partially relevant due to time constraints or lack of collaborative planning.

**Interpretive Framework**

According to Creswell & Poth (2018), interpretive frameworks are used to interpret the research process. The research focuses on understanding specific issues or topics. Conceptualization of the research process begins with the researchers considering what they bring to the inquisition, such as their personal history, perceptions of themselves and others, and ethical and political attitudes.

Social constructivism is a paradigm in which individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work. The researcher looks for participants’ subjective views or meanings of their experiences which are formed by interacting with others in a specific context. From this paradigm, the researcher generates broad open-ended questions which encourages participants to make sense of the experiences. For this study, I seek to examine the various professional development experiences of early childhood teachers that contribute to their professional growth.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

Philosophical assumptions are embedded within interpretive frameworks that qualitative
researchers use when conducting a study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). These can be deeply ingrained views or beliefs about the types of issues that researchers need to study. According to Creswell & Poth (2018) philosophical assumptions guide our actions as a researcher. The philosophical assumptions that help shape this study are ontological assumptions, epistemological assumptions and axiological assumptions.

**Ontological Assumption**

As a life-long educator and now principal, part of my role as the instructional leader includes being mindful and supportive of teacher professional growth. While I believe that meaningful teacher learning is partially influenced by the quality of the school environment, I also think that teachers have a responsibility to take full advantage of learning sessions that are offered by the school district as well as initiate dialogue and collaboration with colleagues to aid their professional development. These informal and formal learning opportunities should meet the needs of all teachers as well as designed, with teachers’ input in mind, and with considerations of schedules and time. Even more importantly, teachers do not always realize the daily interactions and conversations they have with their colleagues about teaching practices or student learning may contribute to their professional growth. Therefore, teachers have to be mindful of their own professional needs and must learn to ask questions and seek advice to become fearless in the classroom. Learning is not always a scheduled workshop, but I do believe that learning is ongoing, sometimes spontaneous, and more often intentional. However, the teachers’ perspectives and realities may be different, so the study was conducted with the intent of collecting multiple realities. Affirmation of multiple realities included the multiple forms of evidence found in the themes using the exact words of the various individuals and presenting their divergent viewpoints.
**Epistemological Assumption**

Educating children must include both the knowledge of God and the preparation for employing that understanding in service. I believe the Bible is the primary source of learning, a Christian frame of reference that transforms the minds of individuals. It builds character, develops critical thinking skills, and is used to help us discern the things of the flesh from the things of God. Romans 12:2 (ESV) says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that by testing you may discern the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Further, our belief system impacts every aspect of our lives. As a school principal, God has given me an important area of influence and I have the privilege to be the light in dark places. Van Brummelen explains this ideal as responsive discipleship and lists three characteristics to describe it: schools help to unwrap students’ gifts, students learn to share one another’s joys and burdens, and schools promote shalom, the biblical peace and justice that heals brokenness and restores relationships (Van Brummelen, 2009). In effect, I help to uncover and hone teachers’ skills so they may develop professionally and be able to better support our students academically, socially, and emotionally.

Grounded in the assumption that teacher growth does not happen in isolation, current professional development efforts lean towards creating collaborative learning experiences for teachers to engage in meaningful activities with their peers to co-construct knowledge about teaching and learning and develop their practice. The epistemological assumption addresses what counts as knowledge, how knowledge claims are justified, and more specifically, what is the relationship between what is being researched and the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research is more subjective, and as such, knowledge is likely derived from the subjective experiences of a wide array of people and not necessarily those who are experts.
**Axiological Assumption**

Teacher professional learning is independent. Some teachers may not always know what they need, but more of what they want concerning their professional development. I believe teachers learn more of what they need as conversations and collaboration with their peers become more frequent and focused. As a teacher for nearly 20 years teaching various grade levels, I learned more from peer-to-peer conversations than most workshops. This can be true even in an early childhood setting. Now, as a principal in an early childhood school, I realize that teachers get more of what they need through having more collaborative time with their peers. These experiences can be formal or informal learning opportunities. Teachers in my school are concerned with how fast they can get the learning they need to help improve the learning outcomes for their students, or even improve themselves professionally. Recognizing and satisfying teachers ‘needs and wants can be complicated. On one hand, not all teachers need the same professional development. On the other hand, ensuring the needs are met within a specific time frame and with limited resources are more challenging.

**Researcher’s Role**

Research represents a shared space, shaped by both researchers and participants. As such, it’s possible for both the researcher and the participants to impact the research process (Bourke, 2014). My role as the “human instrument” is to lead and facilitate all aspects of the study. Early childhood teachers from three preschools were invited to participate in the study. The participants of the study are an essential component of the school culture and school environment, and therefore data generated from their responses provide insight into the participants’ perceptions of professional development experiences. I am a principal at one of the early childhood schools. Teachers who are employed in the other two schools are familiar with
my professional role; however, I do not have any authority over them. While all my biases may be difficult to eliminate, I presented biases that can have an impact on the study. These biases included past experiences with some of the solicited early childhood educators including observation of teaching practices, attending district level meetings and PD where some of the ECE were participants, and designing and implementing some PD sessions. One way I addressed these biases was to ensure the originality and objectivity of the study and increased its validity through triangulation. Semi-structured individual interviews, focus group sessions, and a questionnaire, forming a triangulation. Triangulation is a research tool that allows perspectives on the same reality to be compared. This combination could include divergent entities, times, themes, and spaces (Bellido-Garcia et al. 2022). Data were collected over an 8-week period.

As a principal and part of the district leadership team, I participated in the design and implementation of some professional development sessions. Moreover, during the research process I assumed the role of facilitator and note-taker. To address any bias, I employed the bracketing method as suggested by Creswell & Poth (2018) that allowed me to remove myself from the study by discussing personal experiences with the phenomenon and to set them aside to focus more on the experiences of the participants. As McGrath et al. (2019) stated, the interviewer should not be viewed as someone spoiling or presenting data with prejudice, but rather as a co-creator of data together with the interviewee, where the interviewer’s previous knowledge may play an important part in understanding of the context or the experiences of the interviewee. Qualitative researchers collect the data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All participants from the individual interviews and focus groups were assigned anonymous letters to maintain confidentiality.
Procedures

Following permission granting access to the sites, participants, and IRB approval, the researcher used electronic mail (email) to contact school administration requesting site access permission and teacher participation. The email communicated the purpose of the study, the research methods and data collection and analysis procedures, the link to the questionnaire, the information on participant confidentiality, and the contact information of the researcher. A sample of 12 early childhood educators were selected from the responses. Criteria for selection included persons from a variety of backgrounds and ethnicities; however, similar levels of education, teaching experience, and age ranges were preferred to facilitate categorizing patterns because the more diverse the characteristics of the individuals, the more difficult it will be to find common themes and the overall essence of the participants’ experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Further, data collection included face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions, and a questionnaire. All selected participants were informed of measures taken for maintaining confidentiality. Last, the data was analyzed to identify themes used to answer the research questions concerning the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A crucial component of qualitative research is conducting thorough and multiple data collection methods (Yin, 2018). Data collection began with face-to-face interviews which, according to Roberts (2020), are the main road to multiple realities. After the early childhood teachers received the email and consented to participate, a day and time was set up for the individual interview. The semi-structured interviews were no longer than 50 minutes and were held individually. The individual interviews were followed by two small focus group sessions as suggested by (Yin, 2018) consisting of six teachers each. The focus group sessions were no longer than 60 minutes each and comprise teams of teachers who work and collaborate within
their building. Both individual interviews and focus groups sessions included open-ended questions, were audio recorded, and field notes were taken during both processes. All interview questions were peer reviewed by a small group to ensure all key issues have been included (Barrett & Twycross, 2020). Additionally, a questionnaire was used to ascertain whether teachers know and understand the collaborative opportunities they have, their desire to collaborate, and how these chances help them develop professionally.

Permissions

Before the data collection process began the researcher sought and obtained permission from the institutional review board (IRB) to corroborate that the study design follows protocols for conducting ethical research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following the approval, an application was filed with the IRB to seek permission to begin the research study. The next step was to seek permission from the district’s superintendent to engage teachers in the research. The researcher used electronic mail (email) to contact school administration requesting site access and teacher participation.

Recruitment Plan

Participants were teachers in early childhood who have been teachers in the setting for at least one year. The face-to-face interviews contained a focus on obtaining data that will answer the research questions of early childhood experiences in collaboration related to developing professionally. Instead of using a convenient sample, a purposive sampling method was used to intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After the approval was obtained to utilize the teachers for the study, the personnel director shared the email to the sample pool of early childhood educators in the district.
Data Collection Plan

Qualitative research requires data which are holistic, rich, and nuanced allowing the themes and findings to emerge through careful analysis (Barrett & Twycross, 2020). Some researchers often opt for interviews or observations as the main forms of data collection for qualitative studies. The use of other forms of data sources that are just as viable as the traditional interviews and observations are being encouraged, but one should be sensitive to the outcomes expected during the phases of data collection which involves conducting a good qualitative sampling strategy, a means for recording information, anticipating, and responding to ethical issues, and storing the data securely (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Further, qualitative research should include a sampling plan which consists of several key features: a small sample size where participants who are deliberately chosen, the sample will emerge during the study based on questions that arise during the data collection process and analysis and may include a change in site or altered criteria, and finally, a description and rationale for sampling choices are included in the plan as asserted by Moser & Kortstjens (2018).

Three data collection techniques were used for this qualitative study and included interviews, focus group sessions, and a questionnaire. A specific sequence was chosen because the individual interviews allowed the participants to first describe their own experiences and provided a rationale for how they responded thus allowing the researcher to probe for a more detailed response and additional information to increase their own understanding (Roberts, 2018). According to Baillie (2019), the interactions between participants in focus groups create additional research data and stimulate further discussion, while the researcher’s questions in individual interviews set the agenda for participants’ responses about their perceptions and experiences. A questionnaire was used as a third empirical method to triangulate the data sources
and as a way to extract the opinions, perspectives, or knowledge of the participants (Fairclough & Thelwall, 2021). Once the participants were selected and submitted the consent form (Appendix D), agreeable dates and times were scheduled via email.

**Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach**

The term “interview” was first coined back in the 17th century when anthropologists learned from listening and writing down stories that were told by others about historical events and these narrations were utilized to justify what happened (Roberts, 2020). Collecting data through interviews with participants is a characteristic of many qualitative studies. Interviews give the most direct and straightforward approach to gathering detailed and rich data regarding a particular phenomenon (Barrett & Twycross, 2018).

During the data collection phase of this qualitative case study, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Participants were asked specific questions in key areas that answer the research questions and sub-questions. Although the questions centered on the key areas of the phenomenon, they provided enough flexibility for participants to bring their own personality and perspective to the discussion according to Barrett & Twycross (2018). Additionally, Moser & Kortstjens (2018) suggested that the questions should be broad and open to unexpected findings enabling a thorough in-depth description, exploration, or explanation of the phenomenon under study. Further, the questions were peer reviewed and tested for reliability prior to implementation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Individual Interview Questions**

1. Please describe your educational background as it relates to your current position. CRQ
2. Describe any opportunities you have to develop professionally. CRQ
3. Describe the factors that foster collaboration. CRQ
4. Describe any collaboration opportunities that have helped to develop your practice. CRQ
5. What practices have you learned through collaboration? SQ1
6. Describe the informal opportunities you have to collaborate with other teachers. SQ2
7. Tell me about the discussions that occur during these informal interactions. SQ2
8. Please share any barriers to collaboration. SQ2
9. Describe the formal opportunities you have to collaborate. SQ3
10. Describe the opportunities you have to collaborate with others outside the normal school day. SQ3
11. Describe the topics covered or discussed during these formal opportunities? SQ3
12. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences to collaborate relating to your professional growth that we have not discussed? CRQ

Question one was created to learn more about the participant and how her background and expertise in early childhood education can contribute to the research. Question one was also created to encourage the participants to open up and feel comfortable during the interview. Questions two through five were created to answer the central research question and to learn what supports or challenges might affect teachers’ ability to grow professionally based on time constraints, school schedules, individual expertise, or teachers’ willingness to share knowledge. Questions six through twelve address the central research question by inquiring about the topics discussed during the formal collaboration periods, the informal conversations that take place daily, and if the information learned during these interactions help to hone her teaching practice. These questions also help to answer the central research question by allowing the researcher to have a clearer picture about the challenges that early childhood teachers encounter in Central New Jersey, such as administrative support, structural conditions, learning activities, and
teachers’ willingness to share their expertise. These factors contribute to lack of collaborative
opportunities which can impede professional growth and lead to teaching in isolation. According

to de Jong et al. (2022) teacher-centered collaborative practices in school are distinctively
supportive for teacher learning because they allow teachers to engage in-depth discussions about
teaching methodologies and student learning that are relevant in their context.

**Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis uses a multistep process consisting of several phases. Miles et al. (2020)
offers three concurrent flows of activity and cycles that are interwoven before, during and after
data collection and can be used no matter the data approach selected. It begins with data
condensation (coding - process of selecting, focusing, and simplifying), data display (using
matrices, networks, and graphics), and drawing and verifying conclusions or findings (verifying).
All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the individual interviews were
analyzed to identify themes found across in the data. In the first cycle of coding labels were used
to categorize and assign meaning to the data in order to detect recurring patterns. Then pattern
coding was utilized to group the large amounts of codes into a smaller number of categories or
themes. Then the themes were displayed in a matrix or chart. The process of analyzing and
coding the data is iterative as described by Yin (2011).

**Focus Groups Data Collection Approach**

All focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Using the

techniques suggested by Miles et al. (2020) data analysis began with assigning In-vivo codes,
using words from the participants’ own language and value codes were assigned to denote the
experiences, knowledge, and opinions of the participants.
Focus Group Questions

1. How do the different types of collaboration offered in your current assignment influence you professionally? CRQ
2. Describe how collaboration is facilitated or structured. SQ1
3. Describe any professional learning opportunities you would like to experience that you believe would be beneficial in supporting your professional growth. SQ1
4. Describe factors that foster collaboration. SQ2
5. How can efforts be characterized that are aimed at establishing, supporting, and enhancing teacher collaboration? SQ2
6. Describe your motivation or attitude towards opportunities to collaborate during professional learning communities (PLCs) or in-service workshops. SQ3
7. What would I observe if I attended a collaboration meeting?

Question one was designed to create an opportunity for the focus group participants to openly discuss their experiences in collaboration. The question also allows the researcher to observe the group’s dynamics and their body language, and closely listen to how the answers relay their thoughts and feelings about the topic. The participants’ experience as early childhood teachers allowed them to give further insight on questions two and three. The participants were encouraged to ponder and reflect on how their current experiences in collaboration contribute to their professional growth and what are the next steps to continue to improve. Questions four, five and six were created to learn more about what early childhood teachers in Central New Jersey believe about the current structure and efforts aimed to support and create collaborative opportunities. Finally, question seven was created to give the participants another opportunity to be candid about their experiences and expectations for their own professional development.
**Focus Group Data Analysis Plan**

All focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Using the techniques suggested by Miles et al. (2020) data analysis began with assigning In-vivo codes, using words from the participants’ own language and value codes to denote the experiences, knowledge, and opinions of the participants.

**Questionnaires Data Collection Approach**

A questionnaire which has a single focus for data collection (Yin, 2018) was used as the third data collection method. The questionnaire contained open-ended questions and emailed to the participants. It contained questions that sought to answer the central research question and the sub-questions. The participants were given seven days to complete the questionnaire. Initially, there was a concern about the response rate due to the mid-year assessment demands that are placed on teachers. The concerns about the response rate means that the participants may need to be reminded to complete the questionnaire or the questionnaire may have to be sent a second time to gather data (Creswell & Hirose, 2019). However, the researcher did not have to remind the participants to return the questionnaire. All the participants completed the questionnaire within the given time frame.

**Questionnaire Questions**

1. In the last 12 months, how would you describe teacher collaboration activities in which you participated? SQ1
2. Describe a typical collaboration session with other teachers? SQ1
3. In what ways could collaboration efforts be improved to help teachers develop professionally? CRQ
4. Describe the optimal collaboration session in which you participated. CRQ
5. What does the current program do to support informal teacher collaboration? SQ2

6. What does the current program do to support formal teacher collaboration? SQ3

Question one and two were created as the overarching question that allows the participant to describe the more recent collaborative experiences or activities and gives the interviewer the opportunity to ask follow up questions to expand the conversation. Questions three and four ask about what collaborative experiences early childhood teachers in Central New Jersey preferred and considered to be most useful. Questions five and six were developed to address the central question, but also offered more insight to the types of collaborative learning opportunities that early childhood teachers engaged in and how the existing school structures promoted and or hindered collaborative learning.

**Questionnaire Data Analysis Plan**

The data from the questionnaire were categorized into themes based on the In-vivo codes assigned. According to Miles et al. (2020), In-vivo codes can be summarized in a word or short phrase. He further states that affective methods can be assigned to denote emotions, values, and evaluation.

**Data Synthesis**

All the data analysis techniques, pattern matching, explanation building, time series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis espoused by Yin (2018) aid in linking the data to the propositions, but composing the information comes during the early stages of the study to get accustomed to routine. To answer the research questions, the researcher utilized the Collaborative Constant Comparative Qualitative Analysis Process of six phases in analyzing and synthesizing the data proposed by Richards & Hemphill (2018). The analysis process was completed with another member who has no connection to the participants. The six-step process
began following the collection and transcription of the qualitative data which was done manually using Microsoft Excel. After transcription and the culmination of themes and subthemes of the data the following six steps was employed: (a) preliminary organization and planning, (b) open and priori coding, (c) the development of a preliminary codebook, (d) pilot testing the codebook to ensure accuracy.

**Trustworthiness**

For qualitative researchers, it is pertinent to establish a study’s trustworthiness by addressing how the findings are credible, transferable, confirmable, and dependable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants’ views were solicited using the member checking process validating the findings and interpretations of the research. Member-checking is a technique in which the data interpretations and conclusions are shared with participants, allowing for clarification, error-correcting and to obtain additional information regarding participants’ responses (Johnsen & Christensen, 2017). The second technique used was memoing to create a digital audit trail that can be retrieved and examined. Following these steps was important to ensure consistency throughout the data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For qualitative researchers, it is pertinent to establish a study’s trustworthiness by addressing how the findings are credible, transferable, confirmable, and dependable (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research study follows an appropriate and well recognized approach, and the process of the study allows for replication. Therefore, participants’ views were solicited using the member checking process validating the findings and interpretations of the research. Member-checking is a technique in which the data interpretations and conclusions are shared with participants, allowing for clarification, error-correcting and to obtain additional information regarding participants’ responses (Johnsen & Christensen, 2017).
Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality. Credibility depends on the richness of the information gathered and on the analytical abilities of the researcher. Strategies to ensure credibility are prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, and member checking (Moser & Kortstjens, 2018). In this study, credibility was established by allowing a small group of participants to check the data for accuracy and interpretation. Triangulation was employed by analyzing a single source of data against the other sources looking for patterns, establishing themes, actions, and behaviors focusing on the phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). Additionally, credibility was ensured by investing sufficient time engaging the participants in prolonged discussions. I accomplished this by asking follow-up questions to their initial responses as well as required the participants to provide examples to their statements (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To further solidify credibility, I spent as much time as possible with the participants before and after the interviewing process. This prolonged engagement and persistent observation developed trust between participants and the researcher to allow the researcher to become more familiar with participants to strengthen credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Transferability

Transferability is another aspect of qualitative research that should be considered; it refers to the possibility that what was found in one context is applicable to another context. In this study, a thick and rich description will be employed (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Patton, 2014). The process involved not just describing behavior and experiences, but their context as well so that the behavior and experiences become meaningful to someone who is not connected
with the study. I created the conditions for transferability by providing a detailed description of
the overall research data including a thorough description of the context which included the
location of the early childhood schools, the demographics of the sample, the background of the
selected participants, how and why they were chosen, the reason behind choosing the purposeful
sample strategy, how the interviews were conducted along with the questions for individuals and
focus groups, and any changes made during the research process.

**Dependability**

Dependability and confirmability are like reliability in quantitative studies and deal with
consistency, which is addressed through the provision of rich detail about the context and setting
of the study. In this study, dependability and confirmability were established by utilizing
maximum measures to enable the study to be repeated by other researchers using overlapping
methods and detailed descriptions (Creswell & Poth 2018). To ensure dependability and
confirmability, an audit trail was used. I maintained a consistent analysis process while
reviewing the data. The interpretation of the data was not based on my own experiences,
viewpoints, or preferences about how teachers should perceive their professional development
experiences or decide the application of their learning to the classroom. All records of notes and
meeting minutes were analyzed for accuracy and whether the analytical procedures for
conducting a case study were used.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are
shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba,
1985). Techniques for establishing confirmability include: (a) confirmability audits; (b) audit
trails; (c) triangulation; and (d) reflexivity.
Yin (2018) proposes utilizing audit trails as a technique to reach confirmability in a qualitative study and believes that without it, its confirmability cannot be established. For this study, I utilized an audit trail to reach confirmability which included detailed recordings to describe every aspect of the research process. Further, as with establishing dependability of the study, I cross referenced all the data sources to gain accuracy as a means to capture social reality in a broad manner (Farquhar et al., 2020).

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations entail the surety that information collected was confidentially retained and secured with locks in a cabinet and passwords were utilized for digital files to maintain the integrity of the study. Throughout all phases of the research process, different ethical considerations are important. After data collection, only the participants and myself had access to the data. Moreover, pseudonyms were utilized in lieu of names, and all the data collected were filed away in a locked cabinet. Member checks were used as a validation procedure for interviews, question, and response format. I have an ethical responsibility to ensure that participants are aware that the questions will be thought-provoking and a review of professional practice. I did not want any participant to be taken aback by questions they had not considered for a while leaving them to have little to contribute to the research although they volunteered. Husband (2020) suggests that researchers could perhaps usefully acknowledge that they cannot simply extract information without acknowledging that they may elicit deeper responses from participants when the participants are fully aware of the expectations. Another ethical issue for consideration is data storage. Once the data was collected and while it was being analyzed, all responses, recordings, and field notes were labeled and secured in an electronic database with passwords along with a printed copy stored in a locked cabinet to reduce breach of
privacy and loss. Moreover, participants were made aware of the secured data storage location and who has access to it. The final ethical issue to be considered was the researcher’s position as a principal in one of the three research sites. For this reason, a gatekeeper was assigned to this location to help as suggested by Creswell & Poth (2018). All participants were informed about the purpose and use of the study and rewarded for their participation.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine early childhood teachers’ collaborative experiences relating to developing professionally in Central New Jersey. Chapter three provided an analysis of the procedure, research design, methods for data collection, selection of participants, and data analysis to conduct the qualitative case study. The case study design was chosen because the method allowed for careful exploration of a real-world matter using multiple data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Chapter Three included an explanation for using a qualitative case study design and how it aligned with the research questions. It also comprised a variety of ways data was collected (individual interview, focus groups, and a questionnaire) and analyzed to help answer the research questions. The latter part of the chapter focused on trustworthiness and ethical considerations within the study.

The researcher’s positionality described an interpretive framework and three philosophical assumptions, which were ontological, epistemological, and axiological and how these were associated with qualitative methods, followed by the researcher’s position. Next, the protocols used to conduct the research were delineated by specifying the recruitment and permissions plan. Specifics supporting several data collection techniques and data analysis techniques were offered according to qualitative practices. Lastly, the trustworthiness of the study was explained by addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine early childhood teachers’ experiences in collaboration related to growing professionally. Chapter four presents the results of data analysis and the findings from this study. Data was collected utilizing individual interviews, focused group discussions, and a questionnaire. The individual interviews included 11 open-ended questions, the focus group discussions included seven open-ended questions, and the questionnaire included six open-ended questions. This chapter begins with demographic information for the participants. Quotes from the participants are included and reported verbatim. Chapter four also included a description of the sample, the analysis used to develop findings, a summary of the findings, and a presentation of the data and results.

Participants

The participants for this study were 12 early childhood teachers who teach preschool or kindergarten children at three early childhood schools in central New Jersey. Participants were solicited using purposive sampling. The teaching experience of the participants ranged from two years to 35 years. The study consisted of all female teachers, three African American, one Hispanic, one Portuguese, and seven Caucasian. The diverse insights, perspectives, and experiences of the teachers provided clarity and understanding to the examination of how teacher collaboration contributes to professional growth. All 12 participants completed the individual interviews, and questionnaire, and 11 completed the focus group discussions. The first focus group consisted of five individuals and six attendees for the second group. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym name to protect their identity.
Table 1

Teacher Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Participant</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Highest Degree Earned</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher A</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>bachelor’s</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher B</td>
<td>PK</td>
<td>master’s</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher C</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>master’s</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher D</td>
<td>PK</td>
<td>bachelor’s</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher E</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>bachelor’s</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher F</td>
<td>PK</td>
<td>Dual master’s</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Portuguese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher G</td>
<td>PK</td>
<td>bachelor’s</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher H</td>
<td>PK</td>
<td>bachelor’s</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher I</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>bachelor’s</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher J</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher K</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>bachelor’s</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Latina/Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher L</td>
<td>PK</td>
<td>master’s</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

The research results from this qualitative case study were derived from analysis of data collected from individual interviews, focus group discussions, and a questionnaire. An email invitation letter was sent out to all early childhood teachers, a total of 55. Fifteen teachers responded with interest, but three decided that they could not totally commit to completing the steps in the study in a timely manner.
There was a total of 12 participants from three early childhood schools in Central New Jersey. The researcher reached out to each participant via email to choose a day and time, within a given time frame, to have their interview. Once the participants selected their day and time a confirmation email was sent to the participant. All early childhood teachers, except for one, participated in all three data collection points. One of the participants was unable to attend the scheduled second focus group discussion due to a scheduling conflict and, unfortunately, did not attend the first focus group discussion. Each individual interview took place in person at the participant’s preferred location. The interview was recorded with a voice recorder and transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word Transcription. The researcher listened, reviewed, and analyzed the transcripts several times. Within two weeks of each interview, the researcher provided the transcript to the participants for member checking to ensure the accuracy and completeness of their statements made in the report (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data were coded into categories to support the analysis process. By analyzing and categorizing the data, three consistent themes emerged.
### Table 2

*Overall Themes of the Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional Growth Opportunities</td>
<td>Teacher-initiated Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher Teams or PLCs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>District PD Days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using Time Wisely to Collaborate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for Differentiated PD</td>
<td>Learning Structures or Formats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledgeable Presenters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relevant Information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants provided information regarding their collaboration experiences related to professional growth. Participants shared a descriptive analysis of the factors they believe contribute to professional growth through teacher collaboration. Responses to the individual and focus group questions produced several key themes.

**Theme 1: Professional Growth Opportunities**

All the teachers who participated in the study described much of their experiences in collaboration as site-based learning sessions that occur during grade level PLCs, monthly district professional development days or teacher-initiated learning that happens throughout the day.
Teachers described each learning experience as it relates to growing professionally and some categorized them as being irrelevant, traditional sit-and-get, and one-size-fits-all. However, teachers had more positive comments when describing the teacher-initiated learning.

**Teacher-Initiated Learning**

Most teachers agreed that many of their most meaningful learning experiences occur during unplanned or informal opportunities throughout the day including early morning, prep periods, lunch break, or after school. During these times teachers engage in dialogue or conversations with their colleagues on how to improve their teaching, learning development about specific students, and exchange ideas or teaching materials. Teachers described the frequent contact with their colleagues related to collaboration as helpful and supportive. Many said these meetings serve as an accountability mechanism, a morale booster, and a time to gain new and fresh perspectives. Teacher K explained, “A lot of my learning has been peaking my head into Ms. B’s class in the morning to learn what mentor text she’s using to teach a specific skill, reading strategies for my small group, or how to collect meaningful data. Ms. B would not only share materials, but also demonstrate how to utilize the strategies she was suggesting. She never turned me away.” Other teachers noted some of them would have impromptu after school meetings to create lessons, discuss the curriculum, or analyze student work. Teacher L shared, “I like to meet with other teachers after school. Ms. B is always available to answer any of my questions. I value her insight because all the suggestions and feedback she’s given me over the last fifteen years have worked. Teacher J added, “I seek out my own professional development because the district no longer lets you put in a purchase order for PD. So, I’ve had to pay on my own. The district does not provide anything worthwhile.”
Teacher-initiated experiences were the most popular approach in regard to teacher-to-
teacher learning or teachers seeking professional learning experiences beyond the school day. It was evident that many of the teachers trusted the expertise of their colleagues and valued this process of knowledge sharing. Other teachers stated they do not have the resources to seek outside PD opportunities on their own regularly.

Professional Learning Communities

Every teacher mentioned how the PLCs function in their building. Out of the three buildings, teachers from one building conducted their PLCs in a more inclusive and collaborative manner. Each teacher takes turns hosting the meeting, uses a formal agenda, and everyone gives input. When asked what would be seen if an observer attended the PLC meeting, Teacher E shared, “Everyone on our kindergarten team contributes to the conversation. When it is someone else’s turn to host, we take the lead by suggesting a topic, researching the information if necessary, and presenting the idea during the next PLC. The meeting is run more like a round-table discussion.” Teacher H shared, “The PLC is always run by the instructional coach. I’ve been in this district for 22 years and I’ve gone to two outside workshops. We don’t have any of that now.”

The most pressing factor for participants from the other two buildings was that PLC agendas were administratively driven with some team flexibility. Oftentimes, the teachers would mention possible discussion items for the next meeting but would receive an email the week of their PLC from administration that specific bullet points on the agenda would have to be discussed first. Teacher A shared, “We haven’t had many PLCs this year that allowed us to discuss the topics that mattered most to us. We haven’t had true autonomy in a long time.”

District Professional Development Days
District PD days are offered on a monthly basis beginning in January of each calendar year. These sessions are ninety-minutes long and occur across the district. Only one full day of PD is offered in October. When the participants are asked to describe any opportunities, they have to develop professionally. Teacher A mentioned, “The PD days are a waste of time. They don’t address what we need. It can be made better by asking us what we want and addressing our needs one PD at a time.” Other participants mentioned that some of the PD days are helpful when they have a voice and choice in selecting the session they want to attend. Descriptive words like creative, differentiated, and mindful were used to characterize some of the district PD sessions offered within the last few years. Further, the importance of choice is vital to the success of the teaching profession, and teachers find it hard to look forward to PD when it is mandated. During one of the focus group discussions, some participants compared their professional development experiences to friends teaching in other districts. They agreed that the collaborative conversations that occur during the district PD days make for great learning that can be taken back to the classroom.

**Theme 2: Collaborative Culture**

Simply working in the same school district or the same school does not automatically mean that everyone knows what to do and when to do it. Nor does it mean that all teachers will have the same expectations and work well together. There are different ways of working, personality conflicts, and competition all of which can affect a working relationship. All teachers mentioned PLCs as a format for teacher collaboration. Some teachers from one school found them to be helpful while teachers from the other two schools were negative about the collaborative practices in a PLC, citing no time to discuss issues, no team focus, and some teachers’ reluctance to share information or ideas. Many teachers highlighted that part of a
collaborative culture creates a healthier and trustworthy environment where teachers can set clear
goals and make coherent decisions together.

**Collective Purpose**

The social environment at schools has significant implications for teacher learning. Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2021) reveal that supportive social relations between teachers affect the teachers’ capacities and willingness to work together. At the three early childhood schools PLCs are the leading method teachers use to formally collaborate. Some of the teachers mentioned that they looked forward to meeting their colleagues to explore their lessons, ask questions about their practice, or to discuss student progress. Teachers communicated that these meetings help to build trust and understanding between one another and allow them to be more open and confident when sharing during their grade level meetings or PLCs. Participants considered the small group settings to be a more intimate and collaborative environment to present and discuss topics among the team members. However, not all participants shared the same sentiments. Teacher C shared, “The atmosphere is not always collaborative. There is no protocol for PLCs or inclusivity. We need to have the same purpose and stay focused.”

**Relational Trust**

The participants expressed that the relationships they develop with each other can often be more challenging than the one they have with their building principal or other school administrators. Teachers on the same team see and communicate with each other daily. They often rely on each other for instructional guidance, clarification of tasks, or professional engagement which gives them a sense of trust and belonging. However, the degree to which the need to belong is accommodated may impact their motivation to work together. Some participants communicated a reluctance to collaborate for other reasons.
Teacher H shared, “Some of the teachers on my team have that ‘I’m in charge’ attitude or are too competitive and it’s a little offensive sometimes. It’s ok to be confident but not in a condescending way. It causes dissension with other members.” Two participants who were novice teachers, less than five years, admitted that they struggle to be honest with their team members, and it’s hard to be vulnerable and admit when they need help.

**Time**

Most teachers agreed that the PLC structure and time frame, about 35 minutes per week or the district PD days which run 90 minutes, do not allow enough time for teacher collaboration or deep engagement in an activity of importance. Some participants noted that even the short time they have together during PLCs’ teachers’ efforts are not always collaborative. More often, one teacher would lead the discussion or present an idea and the others would chime in from time to time. A sense of a collective responsibility was not evident. Teacher I shared, “Being a second-year teacher, I am always looking for ways to improve how I teach. I wish the PLCs were longer. I mean, thirty-five minutes a week is not much time to dive deeply into student data.” Teacher F had similar sentiments and shared, “When I began teaching over 20 years ago, there were more opportunities to attend PD outside of the district. Currently, PLCs are our primary source for collaborative learning; however, oftentimes, they are unorganized, unstructured without an agenda, and redundant.

**Theme 3: Need for Differentiated PD Options**

All of the teachers with the exception of one described their experiences in collaboration practices related to professional growth as informal, unplanned and teacher initiated. These experiences were more likely to occur at some point throughout the day as opposed to attending a scheduled PLC or a district PD session. The teachers noted the current arrangement for teacher
collaboration is embedded in the instructional schedule and offered through PLCs and designated district PD days.

**Professional Learning Structures**

Most school leaders agree on the importance of dedicated time for teachers to collaborate and learn from each other. Teachers need time to reflect, share their thoughts, and plan to teach preferably with other teachers on the same grade level. The participants concurred there is still not enough time to have meaningful collaboration experiences without utilizing a proper PLC format. There was also a consensus that some of the faculty meetings could be used for teachers to collaborate and engage in dialogue about student learning and professional growth. Teacher A says, “The principal can find other ways to deliver messages about logistics, compliance items, or events.”

**Teacher Choice**

Allowing teachers to take time to attend state conferences, workshops outside the district, or choose which district PD session they prefer would create positive collaborative learning scenarios. While various learning sessions were offered more recently, teachers suggested this practice should be more routine.

Teacher E shared, “This year, the district offered PD days where teachers got a chance to select what session they wanted to attend. It was helpful to choose my own learning experience.” Teacher D shared similar sentiments, “Out of the three districts I’ve been employed in twelve years, this was the first time I was asked what I wanted to learn and was actually given several options to choose from.” Teacher D is a new teacher in the district, but an experienced preschool teacher. The other 25% or three individuals mentioned that they preferred to have different options for professional development and suggested that practice should continue. Most
participants favored having PD options. Teacher A had different sentiments and shared, “To me even the options to have different learning sessions could be a waste of time if the options are not what I am looking for.”

**Knowledgeable Presenters**

It was evident that teachers felt passionate about being offered and attending professional development that was intentional and useful to help hone their instructional practice and allow them to learn from their colleagues. Teachers also talked about what could be done differently to improve their learning experiences.

Teacher J shared:

The district should go back to what used to be done 20 years ago. These were the times when teachers could put in for a workshop and the district would pay for it - up to a certain amount. Nowadays, we only attend PD that’s arranged or offered by the district or the curriculum developer which seems to be last minute, irrelevant, or we know more than the presenters. Teacher B shared, “As for the last learning session the district offered, I knew more than the presenter who was new in her job, the session wasn’t collaborative as stated in the description, and she didn’t answer your questions.”

**Relevant Collaboration Experiences**

All of the participants mentioned the desire and importance of having professional development experiences that are meaningful to them as a practitioner. The need for strategies and ideas to immediately employ in their classrooms was noted most. “I want to learn something I can use on Monday, not some day. The information should be relevant and practical,” shared Teacher G.
Using professional learning communities (PLCs) as a catalyst to obtain useful information was raised a lot when talking about the existing time or period utilized to collaborate with other colleagues. None of the teachers considered the learning sessions in which they participated recently to be exactly what they needed; however, 75% of them valued the surveys that were conducted and utilized to ascertain what PD teachers desired.

**Outlier Data and Findings**

There were two unexpected outliers that were identified during the data analysis process. The outliers included the teachers’ thoughts and feelings about leadership and team conflict. The expectancy of the first outlier was surprising to the researcher considering the source. Teacher A was considered to always be a team player and problem solver. In regard to the second outlier, Teacher J was previously a part of the administrator team.

When the participants were asked to describe the factors that foster collaboration, Teacher A confessed, “Conflict is not a stranger to our team and there should be protocols in place to combat it instead of always going to the principal. One teacher is disengaged during meetings and the other agrees with whatever is suggested without consideration.” Teacher A was the only teacher who mentioned any sort of existing or potential conflict situations on the team and how it should be resolved. The outlier of conflict resolution determined the participant’s perception of her team's capacity to address differing opinions or ideas.

**Research Questions Responses**

All educators experience professional development throughout their teaching careers. However, the degree to which those experiences contribute to their professional growth can vary. Twelve early childhood teachers were interviewed during the data collection and based on the research questions several major themes and sub-themes emerged. The data illustrated the
conditions the PD experiences had on the early childhood teachers.

**Central Research Question**

The theme Need for Differentiated PD developed from the central question which asked, “How do early childhood teachers describe their experiences in collaboration practices related to professional development?” All of the participants with the exception of one, Teacher I, who had the least experience, expressed dissatisfaction with the overall collaborative opportunities the district offers. Descriptions of their experiences in collaboration practices for professional growth included informal positive teacher-initiated interactions and formal PLCs, and district PD days that are often administratively driven and based on district initiatives. Most participants described their collaboration experiences related to growing professionally as irrelevant and boring. During the one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions the conversations included the need for differentiated professional development. Participants suggested that district leaders who plan PD could make it more relevant by gauging teachers’ readiness, based on observational data and utilizing their interests. Many participants said they feel their time is wasted because everyone receives the same information no matter their prior knowledge or level of expertise. However, Teacher F said, “The sad fact is I do not look forward to district PD because it’s not collaborative or exciting, and many times it does not meet my needs.” Inherently, teachers know they all learn in different ways. They want to learn in the manner in which they are expected to teach their students – differently.

**Sub-Question One**

Sub-Question One asked, “How do early childhood teachers collaborate with colleagues to support professional growth?” The responses to this question led to the theme about the need for differentiated PD opportunities. The three core approaches named were PLCs and district PD
days which many participants degraded. Although participants mentioned that when their colleagues share their knowledge and expertise during informal encounters, it contributes to their professional growth, they still desired a level of personalized learning they can engage with at their own pace, and specific to their needs. Teacher collaboration was exhibited through positive teacher-initiated interactions and were mentioned by all participants as the most helpful method of learning and growing followed by PLCs. District PD days were not mentioned as a useful means to collaborate and gain knowledge or expertise. Teacher E said, “The district has to do a better job of offering diverse PD options and opportunities inside and outside of the district to really help teachers learn and grow professionally. Right now, the options are few.” Essentially, teachers are requiring a shift in thinking from district leaders regarding how professional development is approached and delivered.

**Sub-Question Two**

Sub-Question Two led to the theme about the culture or collaborative environment and asked, “What are the informal opportunities early childhood teachers have to collaborate and develop professionally?” My goal for this question was to learn what supports or challenges might affect teachers’ ability to collaborate and grow professionally. All of the participants agreed that teacher-initiated learning that occurs throughout the school day or after school, on a regular basis, is one of the most valuable informal learning experiences that help them grow professionally. Teacher D shared, “Since we only have PLCs on a bi-monthly basis, I have to seek out my colleagues’ opinions about teaching on a daily basis and learn what is working in their classrooms. Otherwise, I would be lost.” When discussing collaboration opportunities that happen during PLCs teachers also mentioned the cultural conditions that existed within the team. Seventy-five percent agreed that teachers on the same grade level team work well together and
are comfortable talking with each other about student learning, planning lessons, or instructional practices. The other three teachers said they don’t desire or feel as comfortable discussing their practices or student work with their team. Teacher H shared, “I don’t think teachers are totally honest when talking about student progress. What they say doesn’t match the data and they always share what’s going well and leave out what needs to be worked on.” Teacher G shared, “I like my team, but everyone talks over each other trying to get their point across. There are no team norms.” The other informal occasions that teachers have conversations about students, or their teaching practices included lunch breaks and prep periods. Teachers mentioned that these alternative learning periods were useful due to time constraints and an inflexible schedule. Although PLC time was embedded in the instructional schedule, it was necessary for teachers to carve out additional times during the day to collaborate. Moreover, all of the teachers agreed that they learn more from each other during these informal discussions or meetings than what they learn from a scheduled PD session. They found that these meetings relieved anxiety, improved instruction, and outlined next steps for student learning.

**Sub-Question Three**

Sub-Question Three asked, “What are the formal opportunities early childhood teachers have to collaborate/develop professionally?” Responses to this question led to the theme Professional Growth Opportunities. My goal for this question was to learn about the types of collaborative experiences early childhood teachers participate in inside and outside the regular school day and their feelings and beliefs regarding the use or impact of these experiences to grow professionally.

When teachers were asked about the formal opportunities to collaborate related to professional growth, half of the participants admitted they don’t look forward to the district PD
days unless the option was given to select any session they wanted. Even then, the options offered always included the same topics including curriculum, social-emotional learning (SEL), or other checklist items directed by administration. Twenty-five percent of the participants welcomed the PD experience offered by the district due to their lack of knowledge in the preschool or kindergarten curriculum.

I also asked the participants if they sought other PD options. Ten of the 12 participants said they would seek other PD options outside the district if they were offered for free. Only two teachers continue to participate in out of district workshops even if they have to pay the cost out of pocket. One of the two teachers did not respond in favor of PD outside the district although this is how she stays abreast of best practices to serve her students. Teacher L said, “I have to spend my money on classes beyond my master’s degree to learn about things that could make me a better educator, in the classroom, but I should have the opportunity to get what I need in the workplace.” Moreover, many participants mentioned the desire to visit and observe a colleague’s classroom to support their classroom practice. Peer observations were mentioned quite often during the individual interviews as well as the focus group discussions as a desired goal.

Listening to the participants, peer observations were believed to be a practical tool that could be used to meet a teacher’s individual needs, could offer novice teachers non-threatening feedback, and encourage teachers to reflect on their professional practice.

**Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to report the findings constructed from the triangulation of individual interviews, focus group data, and a questionnaire. Chapter four presented the data and results of the study based on the 12 participants’ responses. The research questions in Chapter Three were used to guide the data analysis process and the results were coded and
categorized into themes. Three themes emerged after data analysis: (a) Professional Growth Opportunities (b) Culture and (c) Need for Differentiated PD. These themes combined exposed numerous truths that early childhood teachers feel about their professional experiences in their school district. Teacher-initiated learning experiences were noted as the most desirable method of learning and collaboration. The culture of the PLCs was reported as a crucial aspect of meetings that either provided the environment necessary for collaboration or provided a barrier to collaboration.

All of the participants shared commentary representing their experiences in collaboration. The overall perception of the participants’ past and current experiences with professional development were largely negative with a few smidgens of positivity from new or inexperienced teachers. Nonetheless, all the participants considered collaboration as a vital component to growing professionally. Ultimately, the researcher discovered three outcomes from the participants’ commentaries. First, early childhood teachers desire more collaborative opportunities that lead to professional growth. Second, they believe the cultural conditions affect the learning environment. Lastly, early childhood teachers need to experience differentiated professional development approaches that allow for teacher collaboration and learning. Further discussion of the results and their implications for policy and practice are discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine early childhood teachers’ experiences in collaboration related to growing professionally. Chapter Five presents a complete summary and discussion of the findings and implications relative to the literature and theory. The methods, delimitations and limitations are addressed as well. Chapter Five concludes with suggestions for future research.

Discussion

This qualitative case study was conducted to address the gap in literature related to early childhood teachers’ collaboration experiences related to developing professionally. Teacher collaboration opportunities were offered and mandatory in the school district where this study was conducted. The opportunities were embedded in the daily instructional schedule through professional learning communities and district professional development sessions. Early childhood teachers met with their grade level teams on a bi-monthly basis to discuss student progress, grade level expectations, and other items deemed important by administration or the district. I examined the thoughts, attitudes, and feelings of the early childhood teachers regarding their experiences in collaboration related to growing professionally.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study suggested that early childhood educators have a negative perspective of their past and current collaborative experiences related to professional growth and they remain unenthusiastic about future professional development dreading more of the same. The results emphasized practices the school district employed that both foster and hinder teacher collaboration. Three key themes along with several sub-themes developed from each research
question. Participants reported that the current PD offerings via PLCs and district PD days are insufficient to meet the needs of all the teachers. Professional development opportunities that are targeted and differentiated are necessary for teacher learning and continued growth.

The participants shared similar positive and unfavorable experiences regarding teacher collaboration and the opportunities they have to grow professionally at the three early childhood schools in this study. Opportunities for teacher collaboration are formally presented through district professional development days and professional learning communities along with informal teacher-initiated interactions.

**Summary of Thematic Findings**

This qualitative case study aimed to examine early childhood teachers’ experiences in collaboration related to professional growth in three early childhood schools in Central New Jersey. Data was collected from 12 preschool and kindergarten teachers who participated in individual interviews, one of two focus group discussions, and responded to a questionnaire. The participants of this study described their experiences, feelings, and attitudes regarding teacher collaboration. Once all the data was collected from the individual interviews, focus group discussions, and responses to the questionnaire, the researcher categorized and coded the information which led to three key themes of early childhood teachers’ experiences in collaboration related to professional growth. The first was the professional growth opportunities offered early childhood educators in their current school district. The second was participants view the culture of a team as an integral component to collaboration. The need for differentiated PD was the third theme. Early childhood educators wanted professional development sessions that not only fostered collaboration with their colleagues but also provided unique learning
experiences to meet their individual needs. The findings were relevant to current research which suggested that teacher collaboration is a vital element to teacher professional growth.

During the focus group discussions, it was observed that the culture of the team was not inclusive, and some teachers remained mute during the discussion while others controlled the discussion. Participants shared inclusivity, trust, and willingness to collaborate with colleagues as a necessity during their individual interviews, but some did not exhibit this expectation during the group discussion. Participants who included these characteristics in their descriptions of collaboration experienced somewhat negative associations with working with their peers. The same participants were reserved when answering some questions, if at all. On the contrary, participants who mentioned seeking learning experiences on their own, teacher-initiated collaboration, described their experiences in a more positive light. Teachers reported the importance of being included and heard in their grade level teams. Trust was mentioned several times as a crucial factor that fostered collaboration. “Establishing a collaborative relationship causes feelings of trust and respect to develop in me and my team members,” shared Teacher G.

When participants discussed aspects of collaboration related to professional growth, a combination of perceptions related to the degree of development from different options afforded early childhood teachers were reported. High frequency responses in the study indicated teacher-initiated interactions were the most beneficial to teacher learning and growth followed by PLC meetings. However, some participants believed that the information discussed during PLCs oftentimes included district initiatives or department goals rather than a focus on teacher practice and student progress. Few teachers valued district professional learning days but found them most beneficial when options for different learning sessions were offered. The importance of
choice was mentioned throughout the individual and focus group interviews. When discussing collaborative experiences, Teacher B stated:

When teachers have a choice or a say in what PD sessions we attend, to me, it gives us a voice in how and what we learn. We own our learning and then can decide when and how we’re going to apply that learning to our classroom. When our experiences are decided for us, we don’t always know how we’re going to use the new information because it was never applicable to begin with.

This study revealed early childhood teachers’ preferences for learning was not the traditional professional development unless teacher choice was an option. Most participants mentioned that teachers should be included in the decision making when professional development is planned. It would allow them to have a say in what collaborative experiences they need and want to enhance their own learning and professional growth. Professional development days are prearranged by the district and the content is usually determined by administration and department heads. To improve collaborative experiences, some participants suggested that time, format, and content be considered when planning. Participants felt that the collaborative experiences aren’t as meaningful when they are predetermined, there’s lack of time or the content is irrelevant. Participant F shared, “Professional development seems to be thrown together and last minute…”

Parallels were found in the research relative to the participants’ experiences in collaboration that the opportunities for growth were limited to district professional development days and PLCs. Also, with the literature (Zhang, et al. 2019), early childhood teachers found that time was the biggest barrier to greater teacher collaboration. They would prefer to have more
opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues, in their school and across the district, in professional activities that are crucial to teaching and learning.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

The purpose of this section is to discuss the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications from this study based on how early childhood teachers experience collaboration related to growing professionally. The research findings support Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory and the empirical evidence on teachers’ professional growth and collaborative experiences. Recommendations are suggested for teachers’, district and school administrators’ roles in early childhood teachers’ professional growth.

**Implications for Policy**

For school-based administrators, my recommendations are the same as those reported by the interview and focus group participants: (a) present various PD opportunities (b) offer differentiated and relevant topics, and (c) support the development of a collaborative culture. Another recommendation is to ensure that enough time is provided in the schedule to have meaningful collaborative experiences.

**Implications for Practice**

The research findings of this study have implications for teacher practices in collaboration across early childhood settings even though the participants were specific to a public preschool and kindergarten setting. The data revealed that teachers find collaboration a necessity for professional growth, yet they desire more options for collaborative experiences specific to their personal needs and development as a practitioner. Early childhood teachers consistently pursue teacher-initiated experiences to improve their instructional practice and pedagogy. One implication is that when the early childhood teachers engage in conversations
with the intention of learning new information, pedagogy and instructional practice improves. Another implication is that when early childhood teachers have the option to shape some of their own collaborative experiences, they are more motivated to participate, learn new ideas, and develop professionally. While it is clear that teacher-initiated interactions with other colleagues is an important finding for experiences in collaboration related to growing professionally, it may also be effective for other school settings.

**Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

The theoretical framework used in this study was Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory, which focuses on how learning is constructed through social and observational interactions with others to promote collaborative learning. As mentioned in the literature review, social cognitive theory aligns with the study by supporting the principle that teachers learn through communicating and interacting with others. When teachers collaborate as a way of growing professionally, they come together with the intention of working in agreement on common goals. The purpose of teachers’ professional development is to enhance their practice for better performance of their learners (Oluwatoyin Ayodele, 2019). The participants of this study reported that consistent pursuit of collaboration through teacher-initiated interactions helped them learn new teaching strategies to employ in their classrooms immediately. Support of more meaningful collaboration experiences require school leaders to create learning environments that nurture and maximize teachers’ professional learning and growth. School leaders must be deliberate in planning and offering individualized support that meets the needs of the diverse teaching staff.

Social cognitive theory emphasizes how teachers’ depth of knowledge and skill development might be enhanced through collaborative experiences or vicarious learning.
The idea that such learning is possible through collaboration, one might consider early childhood teachers participating in grade level professional learning communities, department or staff meetings where individuals have the opportunity to imitate the modeled behavior. The results of the study indicate that teachers have minimal input in their learning experiences making professional growth through collaborative opportunities challenging.

The empirical evidence in this study indicated the need for early childhood teachers to collaborate with each other to support professional growth. Authentic collaboration exists when teachers are interdependent, sharing a common vision and responsibility to improve student learning (Ibrahim, 2020). Considering the data from the individual interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaire, the study investigated the early childhood teachers’ collaboration practices used to promote professional growth. The results demonstrated that teacher collaboration provides educators opportunities to gather, create, share, and work effectively together. Collaborating also creates a safe environment for teachers to build strong relationships, helps teachers to identify instructional skills to grow their practice, opens lines of communication and builds trust. The study indicated that when teachers are offered a variety of collaboration opportunities it motivates them to take ownership of their learning, creates an environment of support, as well as increases professional growth. Grounding teacher collaboration related to professional growth within Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory was suitable for this study because it suggests several implications for instruction, motivation, and learning. According to Schunk & DiBenedetto (2023), learners are active seekers of information and by collaborating and interacting with others, they acquire new knowledge, skills, beliefs, and viewpoints. Much of
the research on teacher collaboration focused on elementary, high school, and even collegiate levels. Results from this study can expand the existing research to the early childhood sector.

During data collection, the participants of this study conveyed their own opinions about what experiences in collaboration they believe are necessary to be deemed effective professional development and the beliefs do not significantly diverge from what the experts say in the previous literature. First, teachers want more time to collaborate with their colleagues through more professional learning opportunities and added time to the existing PLC schedule. Time was mentioned as a barrier to collaboration throughout the study, and the participants voiced that the scheduled 35 minutes for a PLC, on a bi-monthly basis, is not enough. Although structures for some dialogue and knowledge exchange were in place through formal PLCs, impassive feelings existed claiming insufficient consideration to support embedding additional time into the schedule for teachers to collaboratively learn. In the literature review, a study conducted by Pui Chi Keung, et al. (2019) supports collaboration through PLCs. They suggest collaboration in a PLC could improve teaching practices, leading to increases in student learning.

Teacher collaboration is key to fostering continuous school reform as it can enhance teacher efficacy, increase teaching means, and transform teaching styles (Qi, et al. 2023). The participants in the study believed there should be a focus on improving teachers’ individual skills which could have a positive impact on teachers’ joint work and, collectively, their sense of responsibility in order to improve their teaching practice and the overall performance of the school. Additionally, collaboration provides early childhood teachers opportunities to have more face-to-face dialogue and develop the skill to effectively address any issues they may be facing. For example, several participants of the study who were new to the profession mentioned that they did not always feel confident and sought the advice or guidance from an experienced
teacher about the curriculum or an instructional practice. They reported that these impromptu conversations or teacher-initiated meetings were meaningful, beneficial, and led them to try a different method or idea to bring about change in the classroom. The participants agreed that additional opportunities to collaborate more meaningfully are directly connected to their professional growth.

Secondly, the participants of this study served preschool and kindergarten students, and they preferred collaborative experiences, aside from the embedded PLCs, that are more hands-on and specific. The need for differentiated professional development was constantly emphasized throughout the study. The participants agreed that professional development should focus specifically on areas in need of improvement and not only on district initiatives, although important. They realized that targeted areas could vary broadly from teacher to teacher and cause complications for professional development planners; however, professional development in early childhood education is most effective when it is concentrated on the what of particular practices (Gardner-Neblett, et al. 2020). The participants possessed varying levels of experience and expertise and acknowledged the professional development opportunities offered them should not be one-size-fits all. The activities that teachers engage during professional development sessions could initiate changes in teacher practice through increased knowledge and the shift in teacher beliefs about their skills. The participants overarching goal in collaborating with their colleagues or attending a PD session was to learn something new that will positively impact their practice. Ten of the twelve participants stated their PD experiences were largely ineffective in supporting professional growth because they rarely addressed their individual needs.

One consideration to differentiate professional development for early childhood teachers was to increase the use of instructional coaches. Each early childhood school in the study utilized
an instructional coach to work with preschool teachers for the purposes of improving the quality of their lessons and instructional practice. The instructional coaches were responsible for creating PLC topics and delivering the content during the bi-monthly PLC meetings along with conducting teacher reflective cycles throughout the year. Only two teachers named the instructional coach as a primary resource for professional growth. Other participants considered the presentations by the instructional coach as a form of a sit-and-get professional development session. Primarily, the instructional coaches were looked upon as support, but not mentioned as a mentor. However, Tichenor & Tichenor (2018) points out an important aspect of teaching and learning is the collaboration among teachers and coaches.

Lastly, many of the participants shared that the existing team culture was not always conducive to collaboration. With the ongoing changes in staffing, teachers on the same grade level had to constantly learn how to work together. Learning what is important to others, their values, and goals may be one of the most important tasks to tackle as a team member. Many participants described the team culture in their building as a collective body, and others described their team culture as self-regarding. Participants stated most of them discussed student progress, shared ideas or exchanged materials during the PLC meetings, but not all team members were willing to share or collaborate. When asked to describe the factors that foster collaboration, respect, support, and purpose were included in the responses, but somehow these characteristics were nonexistent at many of the meetings. Participants from a single building told me that one individual leading the meeting and others following was how collaboration typically manifested in the grade level team.

To improve early childhood teachers’ experiences in collaboration by transforming the team culture requires learning conditions that are inclusive, supportive and respectful to
everyone. Thornton & Cherrington (2018) state when teachers have the same purpose and a focus on setting goals and achieving results, collectively, PLCs can be the catalyst used to build a collaborative culture. Participants stated they need to feel empowered to take risks and grow their practice. Listening to the participants, this can be accomplished by receiving feedback from their colleagues, having open discussions, and prioritizing time for professional conversations. Once independence was obtained then interdependence could be accomplished.

Research results in this study provided new information for the early childhood sector by revealing the collaborative practices utilized in early childhood schools that teachers deem meaningful and purposeful to help them grow professionally and the practices that are reported to be a waste of time and ineffective. The research helps administrators and district leaders understand that early childhood teachers need to play a role in planning and choosing the collaborative experiences specific to their unique needs.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

The researcher has identified limitations that could have influenced the results of the study. For one, a single setting was used that allowed the researcher to examine the collaboration experiences of early childhood teachers specific to the culture of that school district. A purposive sample of early childhood teachers were recruited and included in the study because they shared common professional development practices and PLC expectations. The sample size consisted of teachers from preschool and kindergarten levels who had at least one year of teaching experience on that grade level. All participants were 18 years of age or older.

A major limitation of this research was that it utilized only a small sample of early childhood teachers from three schools in the same district and their experiences in collaboration during district PD days, PLCs and teacher-initiated interactions. Professional development via
out-of-district workshops was mentioned but not a focus. Also, because of these limitations, the results cannot necessarily be generalized to all populations of teachers. However, these experiences could be an additional area of related research. Further research focused on vertical articulation across grade levels would provide another layer of research into the professional growth and development of early childhood teachers. Additionally, future research should include multiple teachers from multiple school districts who engage in collaboration activities.

The delimitations of the study were early childhood teachers in three early childhood schools in New Jersey. Twelve teachers who were 18 years or older with a minimum of one year of teaching experience in an early childhood setting volunteered and were selected for the study. However, all early childhood teachers in preschool and kindergarten, 55 teachers in all qualified for the study, and were solicited to participate. The researcher controlled the geographical components of the study by selecting participants with which she had access. Moreover, the researcher’s professional role is to conduct observations, provide PD and training, and oversee the early childhood education program. Therefore, the study participants may have participated in professional learning sessions with the researcher at some point over the last several years.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Several research studies have been conducted on teacher collaboration in general. However, gaps exist in the research on experiences in collaboration of early childhood teachers related to growing professionally. The results from this qualitative case study suggested that teachers do not regularly experience collaboration related to teacher development. One participant even commented, “Administrators should sit in the PD that we do and then maybe they’ll understand why teachers are so disgruntled and complain about what we have to sit through.” While this single comment may be an outlier (there was a high level of collaboration...
for this participant), the results of this study signified that degrees of experiences in collaboration are minimal. I recommend ongoing research that provides opportunities to expand the examination of early childhood teachers’ collaborative experiences, but also to include the teacher in steering that collaboration. Additionally, studies can be conducted across grade levels in both early childhood and elementary education that would allow a comparison and contrast with this study.

Conclusion

The results from this qualitative case study suggested that early childhood teachers do not regularly engage in many collaborative activities that aid professional growth. One teacher commented, “I haven’t gotten excited about PD in over 10 years.” Further, teachers in this qualitative case study shared the overall experience in collaboration can be improved with teacher choice and relevant and differentiated PD options. Collaboration options that teachers in this study do not participate in often or ever included peer observations or class visits, vertical articulation with same grade level teachers in other buildings, and workshops outside the district. However, the early childhood teachers in this study believed that such collaboration is invaluable and an effective use of time. The study sought to examine early childhood teachers' experiences in collaboration related to growing professionally. Data were collected from 12 early childhood teachers in preschool and kindergarten and were coded into themes. Three major themes emerged after completing the data analysis: (a) Professional Growth Opportunities, (b) Culture, and (c) Need for Differentiated PD. Each theme led to clarity and understanding of the study’s research questions.

The central research question asked, how do early childhood teachers describe their experiences in collaboration practices related to professional development? This question sought
to learn what supports or challenges might affect early childhood teachers’ ability to grow professionally based on time constraints, school schedules, individual expertise, or teachers’ willingness to share knowledge, the informal conversations that take place daily, and if the information learned during these interactions help to hone her teaching practice. The first sub-questions asked, how do early childhood teachers collaborate with colleagues to support professional growth? This question sought to identify any lack of collaborative opportunities which can impede professional growth and lead to teaching in isolation. The second sub-question asked, what are the informal opportunities early childhood teachers have to collaborate and develop professionally? This question allowed the participants to specify the opportunities offered them that led to professional growth. It also allowed them to divulge any factors that fostered or hindered collaboration. The last sub-question asked, what are the formal opportunities early childhood teachers have to collaborate and develop professionally? The aim of this question was to identify any PD opportunities that are embedded in school practices.

The study provided insight into the paths teachers take to develop professionally through teacher collaboration, challenges, and positive outcomes to having teacher-initiated experiences. It also provided an opportunity for educators and school administrators to better understand potential effects that existing collaboration options have on early childhood teachers’ professional growth. More needs to be done to provide early childhood teachers with opportunities to learn and grow with their colleagues in a supportive and fruitful environment.
References


Appendix A IRB Approval Letter

IRB #: IRB-FY22-23-1097
Title: Early Childhood Teachers' Experiences in Collaboration in Collaboration Practices Related to Developing Professionally: A Qualitative Case Study
Creation Date: 2-14-2023
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Linda Alston-Morgan
Review Board: Research Ethics Office
Sponsor:

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**Study History**

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**Key Study Contacts**

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<tr>
<td>Rebecca Lunde</td>
<td>Co-Principal Investigator</td>
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<td>Linda Alston-Morgan</td>
<td>Principal Investigator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linda Alston-Morgan</td>
<td>Primary Contact</td>
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Appendix B Permission Request

Dear Superintendent,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is Early Childhood Teachers’ Experiences in Collaboration Practices Related to Developing Professionally and the purpose of my research is to examine the professional learning opportunities EC teachers have that help to expand their professional competencies.

I am writing to request your permission to contact staff members via email to invite them to participate in my research study. Once participants have been selected, they will be asked to contact me to complete the attached questionnaire and participate in a face-to-face interview and a focus group discussion. Participants will be presented with informed consent 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 official letterhead indicating your approval or respond by email to [lalstonmorgan@liberty.edu](mailto:lalstonmorgan@liberty.edu). A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Linda Alston-Morgan
Principal Investigator
Appendix C Site Approval

February 10, 2023

Dear Mrs. Alston-Morgan,

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Early Childhood Teachers’ Experiences in Collaboration Practices Related to Developing Professionally, I have decided to grant you permission to contact our staff and invite them to participate in your study.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

☒ I grant permission for Linda Alston-Morgan to contact early childhood teachers to invite them to participate in her research study.

☐ I am requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,
Appendix D Consent Form

Title of the Project: Early Childhood Teachers’ Experiences in Collaboration Practices Related to Developing Professionally
Principal Investigator: Linda Alston-Morgan, Doctoral Candidate
School of Education, Liberty University

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be an early childhood teacher with a minimum of one year classroom teaching experience in an early childhood setting. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please take time to read the entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in it.

The purpose of the study is to examine the professional learning opportunities EC teachers have that help to expand their professional competencies.

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:
1. Participate in an in-person, audio-recorded interview that will take no more than 30 minutes.
2. Participate in a focus group discussion, audio-recorded, that could take up to 60 minutes.
3. Answer a short online questionnaire.

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study include making a personal contribution towards the advancement of professional development for early childhood teachers, enhancing one’s own self-efficacy, and to provide evidence to effect change in your teaching, classroom, and school district.

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports 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.

- Participant responses to the online questionnaire will be confidential and data from the face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
• Data collected from you may be used in future research studies. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
• Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
• Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts deleted. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. At the conclusion of the procedure participants will receive a $25 Amazon gift card. Email addresses will be requested for compensation purposes; however, they will be collected by email at the conclusion of the survey to maintain your anonymity.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Is the researcher in a position of authority over participants, or does the researcher have a financial conflict of interest?</th>
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<td>The researcher serves as the Director of Early Childhood in Central New Jersey. To limit potential or perceived conflicts, data collection for the online questionnaire will be anonymous, so the researcher will not know who participated/a research assistant will ensure that all data is stripped of identifiers before the researcher receives it. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate or not participate in this study.</td>
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Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

The researcher conducting this study is Linda Alston-Morgan. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [redacted].

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 IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, [redacted]; our phone number is [redacted], and our email address is [redacted].
Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

____________________________________
Printed Subject Name

____________________________________
Signature & Date
Appendix E Individual Interview Questions

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe your educational background as it relates to your current position.

2. Describe any opportunities you have to develop professionally.

3. Describe the factors that foster collaboration.

4. Describe any collaboration opportunities that have helped to develop your practice.

5. What practices have you learned through collaboration?

6. Describe the informal opportunities you have to collaborate with other teachers.

7. Tell me about the discussions that occur during these informal interactions.

8. Please share any barriers to collaboration.

9. Describe the formal opportunities you have to collaborate.

10. Describe the opportunities you have to collaborate with others outside the normal school day.

11. Describe the topics covered or discussed during these formal opportunities?

12. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences to collaborate relating to your professional growth that we have not discussed
Appendix F Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions

1. How do the different types of collaboration offered in your current assignment influence you professionally? Enhances content knowledge, instructional practice,

2. Describe how collaboration is facilitated or structured. Sometimes guest speakers or teachers from specialized departments, principals, directors, mostly instructional coaches or student advisors,

3. Describe any professional learning opportunities you would like to experience that you believe would be beneficial in supporting your professional growth. More options, different topics,

4. Describe factors that foster collaboration.

5. How can efforts be characterized that are aimed at establishing, supporting, and enhancing teacher collaboration?

6. Describe your motivation or attitude towards opportunities to collaborate during professional learning communities (PLCs) or in-service workshops.

7. What would I observe if I attended a collaboration meeting?
Appendix G Questionnaire

Questionnaire Questions

1. In the last 12 months, how would you describe teacher collaboration activities in which you participated?

2. Describe a typical collaboration session with other teachers?

3. In what ways could collaboration efforts be improved to help teachers develop professionally?

4. Describe the optimal collaboration session in which you participated.

5. What does the current program do to support informal teacher collaboration?

6. What does the current program do to support formal teacher collaboration?