TEACHER VOICES ON ENHANCING THEIR PRACTICE THROUGH COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

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TEACHER VOICES ON ENHANCING THEIR PRACTICE THROUGH COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Krystina Occhicone

Master of Art in Teaching and Foundations, Fairfield University, 2012
Bachelor of Science in Mathematics, Fairfield University, 2009

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education in Instructional Leadership
in the Department of Education and Educational Psychology
at Western Connecticut State University
2020
Enhancing one’s professional practice is something that should be ongoing throughout one’s career, especially in the field of education where innovations are consistently emerging. However, educators are not necessarily aware of the fact that they can enhance that practice simply by the way in which they engage collaboratively with one another. To that end, this qualitative research study explored the ways in which K-12 teachers engage with one another through collaborative professional learning experiences. More specifically, the researcher examined the roles and shared the voices of teachers who effectively collaborated in regularly scheduled small group meetings. The perspectives of these teachers immersed in a culture of collaborative learning can help to illustrate and illuminate the essence and impact of collaborative professional growth experiences. This study used a generic qualitative research design to explore how and why collaborative practices positively influenced teacher growth. Methods of data collection included a teacher questionnaire, non-participant observation, teacher interviews, and follow-up procedures. The data analysis process allowed theoretical concepts to emerge. Results suggested that teachers motivated by their own love of learning and desire to grow enter a professional setting where they take ownership of their growth process through predictable schedules outlined with clear expectations. Teachers perceive collaborative learning
group time as beneficial and as a positive professional development experience brought about because they have opportunities to actively listen, dialogue, and reflect. The results of this study suggested what factors of a collaborative professional learning model deem it to be successful, and in turn, best enhance the professional practice of educators. Ultimately, information derived from this work is hoped to serve as a guide to help aid schools in purposeful and productive teacher growth.
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2020
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a result of the support and influence of so many people, the completion of this dissertation was possible. All of the family, friends, colleagues, cohort members, professors, and mentors who have been there for me throughout this dissertation journey helped to make this dream come true.

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My time spent in this rigorous EdD Program has allowed me to grow both professionally and personally. The immense amounts of knowledge and innovation gleaned from my professors will be carried over into my future pursuits. I am forever grateful to have had the opportunity to pursue this degree alongside such a dedicated and inspiring cohort of people. It was a pleasure to work with such a passionate group, especially Parvin Taraz, Steven Anton, Gloria Rosati Peterson, and Kristina Paradise. Without Parvin Taraz, I would not have come into this research. And without the others, I would never have made it this far. Thanks to Western Connecticut State University’s EdD Program, I have not only taken the next steps in my professional career, I have also made friendships that I will cherish long after the program’s end.

A very special thanks goes to the professors who took a leading role in the completion of this dissertation. First, it was Dr. Jody Piro who met with me at my favorite coffee shop to help me discover my research interests. Then, it was Dr. Tricia Stewart who led me in the direction
of my research pursuit. Later, Dr. Marcia Delcourt helped me form the perfect committee to help me reach the finish line. Without my dissertation committee, Dr. Susan Baum, Dr. Marcia Delcourt, and Dr. Stephanie Bell, I could not have accomplished this goal. The time, interest, and support the three of these women have dedicated to me truly inspired me to make them proud of this final product.

Most importantly, to say that all of this could not have been made possible without my primary advisor, Dr. Susan Baum, would be a complete understatement. Even with a three-hour time difference, Dr. Baum always made time to devote to my research needs. Our countless hours spent on Zoom sessions and through e-mail communication were instrumental to my professional growth and progress. Dr. Baum always knew how to stop my heart from racing and put my mind at ease. Dr. Baum answered all my questions with intellectual thought and challenged me wholeheartedly every step of the way. Because of this, my gratitude to her extends far beyond that of a primary advisor, but to someone I hope to have a part of my personal and professional life forever.

Last but certainly not least, I cannot thank the love of my life enough. Nick came into my life in the midst of my doctoral pursuit and endured it without question. His genuine interest in my goals along with his eagerness to help in any way possible and his ability to make me laugh at any moment were equally as significant to my success as anything else mentioned above. I am incredibly appreciative for his support, patience, and understanding as I followed this dream of mine. And, now, I cannot wait to tackle more dreams together!

It goes without saying that my professional practice has truly been enhanced due to my collaboration with all of those acknowledged above.
DEDICATION

To my parents, Louis and Pamela Occhicone. Without you both, individually and collectively, this pursuit never would have been possible. Dad, you taught me the importance of having a good work ethic and a determination to succeed. Mom, you have always been my biggest fan. May you share in this triumph, as I wouldn’t have accomplished it without the two of you. I hope to always make you proud.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Historically, the United States has always set ambitious goals for its educational system (Putnam & Borko, 1997). In the early 1990s, a movement instituting standards that held schools accountable for what students were expected to know and be able to perform at each grade level began. Educational reforms such as Outcome-Based Education (OBE) adopted in the 1990s, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) signed into law in 2015, and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Initiative first introduced in 2016 were all instituted to complement this national movement.

At the core of such educational reforms are the teachers who are directly connected to students and are required to implement the demands of high-quality standards in classrooms (Cuban, 1990). Therefore, if the United States strives for continued success in this movement, that success rides heavily on the effectiveness of high-quality teachers (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001).

Highly qualified teachers take the opportunity to benefit from their genuine desire and proactive attitude for the continuous development of their professional practice (Martin, Kragler, Quatroche, & Bauserman, 2014). Year after year, those teachers aim to rejuvenate their curriculum and instruction, better their classroom management, incorporate social justice concepts, teach to a variety of student learning styles, incorporate relevant technology, stay current, and provide open communication between students and parents, just to name a few. The list may seem onerous, but teachers need not feel isolated in their continued developmental process. Instead they should find support from the leadership within their learning community. Such leaders can organize a variety of professional development experiences to help teachers improve their practice, and in turn, reap the benefits of improved teaching and learning within
their school districts, as demanded by national standards and expectations (Fullan, 2001; Martin et al., 2014).

Information shared in the chapters that follow offers a guide to aid schools in such purposeful and productive teacher growth. More specifically, this study focuses on exploring the practice of teachers who regularly engage in collaborative professional learning experiences.

**Rationale**

Regardless of a teacher’s overall tenure, time spent in any given school, or experience teaching at any given grade level, it is important that all teachers become exposed to the latest innovations in teaching and learning in meaningful ways. Students deserve high quality teachers and teachers deserve a means to high quality development of practice. With that in mind, Mansour, EL-Deghaidy, Alshamrani and Aldahmash (2014) share that:

> Teachers’ learning, their practice and their development are seen as dynamic, multi-layered processes constituted in the dialectic relationship between micro individual and interactional elements of teachers’ learning and larger, social, political and economic macro contexts of practice. (p. 952)

To that end, teachers require a system that offers them relevant, authentic, and dynamic professional development experiences; with the hope that students advance alongside their teachers undergoing developmental experiences of genuine purpose.

While there are a variety of professional development opportunities available to teachers, it appears as if several of the more compelling models include collaborative practices, such as teacher mentoring programs and professional learning communities, which help to create a foundation for a more engaged and developing community of professional practice (Kensler, Reames, Murray & Patrick, 2011). A recent study conducted by Cuesta, Azcárate, and
Cardeñoso (2016) showed that one major factor supporting teachers’ processes of conceptual progress and development as professionals was the dynamic of collaboration. When educators are given the opportunity to build their professional relationships with other educators and develop meaningful mutual cohorts centered around a desire to evolve professionally, they afford themselves the chance to adapt and increase their professional competence (Martin et al., 2014). This use of collaborative professional development may present teachers with the time and motivation to share experiences, discuss problems, provide feedback, partake in observations, and undergo professional growth in non-evaluative ways within the context of their own schools and working with their own peers.

Therefore, with an aim to meet the needs of our ever-evolving student population, we must not only build experiences for teachers who channel their own continued professional growth. We must also consider the most efficient and purposeful ways to engage teachers in participating meaningfully in improving their practice.

Statement of the Problem

Enhancing one’s professional practice is something that should be ongoing throughout one’s career, especially in the field of education where innovations are consistently emerging. In fact, the success of present-day educational reform efforts is directly related to creating purposeful opportunities for teachers’ continued learning (Kensler, Reames, Murray, & Patrick, 2011). Yet, most educational professional development opportunities have been labeled as flawed (Kensler et al., 2011).

Generally, professional development opportunities do not consider what motivates teacher engagement or what processes elicit growth in teachers (Mansour, EL-Deghaidy, Alshamrani, & Aldahmash, 2014). As a result, teachers may become frustrated, disheartened by
or resentful of a system that they feel is not offering relevant, authentic, and dynamic developmental experiences. Rather than engaging in meaningful investments to their professional growth, teachers may even feel as though they are simply participating in high-priced compliance tasks (Tooley & White, 2018). If professional development is to be meaningful, it is critical to explore the implementation of more effective professional growth opportunities for K-12 teachers.

Research on increased professional competence points to the importance of working closely with colleagues as an effective option for growth (Borko, 2004; Elmore, 2004). As teachers seek to gain varied perspectives and multiple approaches to the complex challenges of teaching and learning, engagement in purposeful group inquiry work may be highly effective (Bell & Gilbert, 1994). This kind of personal professional development can provide a structure for teachers to reflect and address their professional needs, as well as give them an empowering voice to develop those needs (Mansour et al., 2014). To that end, this research examined how such a process unfolds and how teachers perceive themselves as expanding their expertise as a teacher, which has always been of extreme importance to the researcher as a lifelong learner. Chapter Three contains the researcher biography to illustrate this.

**Significance of the Research**

Because effective professional development opportunities give teachers the chance to evolve their knowledge, skills, and attitudes for the better (Blank & Sindelar, 1992), school district personnel worldwide find themselves constantly searching for the perfect professional development recipe (Davis, 2017). But all too often the opportunities for growth afforded to teachers are criticized as unfocused or irrelevant (Sparks, 2002). With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, it became evident that districts should move away from
anyone-size-fits-all and one-stop-shop generalized professional development workshops and turn to a more personalized learning approach. A recent study conducted by Tooley and White (2018), with a focus on teacher licensure renewal, showed that professional development activities are unlikely to yield significant improvements in teacher practice and, in turn, student achievement until the priority is shifted to authentic demonstrations of teacher learning. Tooley and White (2018) go on to state that:

More robust evaluation systems that draw upon state learning and professional standards provide an opportunity to identify—and measure growth on—specific teacher learning needs more adeptly than at any point in the past, but most states and districts have not harnessed their full potential for doing so. (p. 26)

If district administrators want to see their teachers engaged in meaningful professional learning experiences, they need to rely on research of what it really means to ensure such experiences (Davis, 2017). Such research is limited. This study is poised to offer more evidence that recommends efficient and purposeful ways in which districts can engage teachers to participate meaningfully in improving their practice, specifically with the use of a teacher collaborative growth model. The teacher voices shared in this qualitative study offer an addition to the literature regarding what schools can do to promote such purposeful and productive teacher growth through their engagement in meaningful collaborative professional learning opportunities.

**Potential Benefits of the Research**

Through the use of qualitative research methods and individual teacher voices, this study offers teacher perspectives of a collaborative professional growth experience. Specifically, this research provides an opportunity for educational stakeholders to understand how a group of K-12
teachers view their responsibility to enhance their own professional practice, what factors lead mostly to their own professional growth, and how their participation in a collaborative learning environment can influence teachers’ professional growth. Although not necessarily generalizable to all, the results of this study can influence school personnel in determining whether collaborative learning experiences can improve teachers’ practice and offer meaningful professional growth to teachers.

**Definition of Key Terms**

Because terms can vary within contexts, it is important to understand how the key terms of this study are defined in the context of this research. The terms relevant to this study include:

1. *Active Learning:* The act of participating in the learning process where learners are not passively listening, but instead discussing, brainstorming, and problem-solving (Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

2. *Andragogy:* The art and science of adult learning that considers what adult learners know from their lifetime of experiences and what research says about the characteristics of adult learners that is different from that of adolescents (Knowles, 1973).

3. *Collaborative Learning Groups:* Small groups of teachers gathering under the direction of a learning group facilitator as a means to engage in professional learning.

4. *Professional Learning:* Experiences that expand educators’ content and pedagogical knowledge; enabling them to apply their knowledge to better their educational practices and improve student learning (Martin et al., 2014).

b. *Effective Professional Learning*: Systematic approaches to professional learning that lead to positive change(s) in teacher practice(s) and lead to improvement(s) in student learning (Martin et al., 2014).

5. **Theme One: Intrinsic Motivation**: the coupling of a teacher’s love of teaching and learning and their commitment towards growth
   a. *Love of Teaching and Learning*: a teacher’s incessant passion for teaching and enduring curiosity for learning
   b. *Commitment Towards Growth*: a dedication to advancement in self and students

6. **Theme Two: Positive Participation**: the encompassing of a sense of group ownership, clear structure for meetings, and perceived benefits to teachers
   a. *Group Ownership*: the composition of group members in a culture of trust
   b. *Structure*: regularly scheduled meetings with a sense of relevance provided by clear expectations and a purposeful agenda
   c. *Perceived Benefits*: a variety of personal growth experiences for teachers, such as building better relationships with colleagues, gathering interesting feedback, getting ideas for improved lesson plans, and helpful suggestions for reaching students

7. **Theme Three: Cognitive Processes**: factors leading to professional growth of teachers
   a. *Active Listening*: fully concentrating on hearing the perspectives of others
   b. *Purposeful Dialogue*: a mode of exchange among people in which there is a true turning to one another, and a full appreciation of one another as genuine beings (Senge, 2014).
c. *Reflection*: a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one’s experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas (Rodgers, 2002).
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the participants’ perspectives of teacher collaboration, inclusive of dialogue and reflection, and the influence it has on enhancing one’s professional practice in a K-12 learning environment. Specifically, this study focused on exploring the practice of teachers who regularly engage in collaborative learning groups. This chapter provides a review of literature as it relates to the current study. Accordingly, this review of literature begins with a discussion of the review process, followed by the theoretical framework grounding the study, and then the chapter is subsequently divided into two additional sections discussing professional development and, more specifically, collaborative models of professional development. The chapter concludes with a chapter summary.

**Literature Review Process**

At the onset of the research process, Google Scholar was used to survey what information was readily available online. Each Google Scholar search was customized to search articles with the exclusion of patents, but with the inclusion of citations, displaying only English results, at 10 results per page. Result sorting was completed by relevance, rather than by date. Custom range for article publication was set from 1999 to the present. The researcher further refined her search by only including results with associated Portable Document Format (PDF) files.

Google Scholar was found to be especially useful in the preliminary process of finding relevant and timely material related to effective professional development for teachers. The article links provided for each result were most helpful in the initial stages of the literature review process. Ultimately, Google Scholar served as a starting point from which the researcher probed deeper using Western Connecticut State University’s Ruth A. Haas Library.
The main source for this review of literature was the online databases accessed through the WCSU Libraries webpage. To retrieve articles for this literature review, the databases were first narrowed down by subject. Based on recommendations from other peer researchers, the “Education & Ed Psychology” database was selected. From there, the “EBSCOhost Combined Databases (EBSCO)” were chosen to allow the researcher to access more than one database at a time. When directed to EBSCO, the researcher selected all databases contained therein. This inclusive choice was made with the goal of collecting greater amounts of literature at the expense of search time. Once all databases were selected, the advanced search allowed for the specification in search parameters. The following parameters were selected: full-text, peer-reviewed journals, and references available. Like the Google Scholar search, the researcher set the custom range for article publications from 2000 to the present and requested only results with associated Portable Document Format (PDF) files.

To understand the continuation of this literature review process, an example of a typical search through EBSCO should be explained. The researcher found that with the above limitations and using “Professional Development” as the search term, EBSCO returned 103,614 publications in order of relevance. In an effort to narrow down the results, additional search criteria were added: academic journals, English as primary language, qualitative study, and quantitative study. This resulted in 347 hits. From the initial results, the researcher eliminated literature in irrelevant categories outside of education, such as nursing. Setting the subject major heading to “Teachers” further refined this to 36 articles. These results were then assessed to determine their relevance to the current study.

This detailed process was repeated for the other searches conducted by the researcher. Additional search terms included: collaboration, dialogue, and reflection. The found literature
assisted the researcher in identifying trends, issues, and theories as they pertain to the current study. Articles that were identified as salient to this study are included in the following literature section.

**Literature**

**Theoretical Framework**

The desire to enhance one’s professional practice can be directly tied to adult learning theory, otherwise known as andragogy. Malcolm Knowles popularized this theory across the United States in the 1980s, as his major work had him seeking after “a coherent and comprehensive theory of adult learning” (Knowles, 1989, p. 76). Knowles challenged the original construct of pedagogy in that it failed to explain the ways in which adult learning takes place. Ultimately, Knowles introduced five crucial assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners, different from those of children (Knowles, Swanson, & Holton, 2005). These five assumptions: self-concept of the learner, the role of experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn grounded Knowles’ work in the development of the adult education movement (Knowles et al., 2005).

First, Knowles (1970) described the self-concept of the adult learner as moving from dependent to independent and self-directed. In other words, Knowles proposed that maturing individuals will become more independent in their learning, with an increased desire to direct such learning. Ultimately, Knowles’ assumption of self-concept shows the shift educators take from their dependency upon others, such as their administration, to determine their learning needs to an autonomy in their own learning. Building upon his first assumption, Knowles’ second assumption is that the adult learners’ accumulation of experiences will allow them to discover for themselves the gaps between where they are and where they wish to go (Knowles,
1970). This accumulation of experiences can allow teachers to uncover what they are still lacking in their efforts towards improved practice. Knowles' third assumption states that, “as a person matures, his readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his social roles” (Smith, 2002, p. 3). That is to say the developmental tasks of adults are primarily products of their social roles (Knowles, 1970). To that end, adult learners tend to be driven to stay current with the ever-changing social demands that surround them, just like teachers aim to stay current with innovations in education. Knowles’ fourth assumption posits that an adult’s orientation to learning differs from that of children, in respect to time (Knowles, 1970). Adults are driven by a need or problem to be solved that requires immediate application to their practice. Knowles’ fifth and final assumption focuses on the motivation of an adult learner shifting to an internal rather than external emotion (Knowles, 1970). He argues that, “adults are motivated to devote energy to learn something to the extent that they perceive that it will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their life situations” (Knowles, 1990, p. 61). Considering Knowles’ final two assumptions, high-quality teachers want to be able to apply innovative tasks.

As his life work progressed, Knowles’ ideas and assumptions evolved into a model of learning that promotes a meaningful and purposeful experience for adult learners (Knowles et al., 2005). Because this research study explored the practice of teachers who regularly engage in collaborative learning groups as a particularly effective measure to promote professional learning for teachers, it was relevant to turn to Knowles’ model of adult learning theory as its framework. Knowles’ work proved particularly appropriate for exploring teachers’ responsibility to enhance their own professional practice. Current research extends this theory of adult learning onto conversations concerning the professional development of teachers.
**Professional Development**

To this day, the knowledge of and understanding behind how adults learn continues to grow. Dating back to the 1960s, professional development began with a focus on general teaching skills, including classroom and time management as well as student grouping and engagement. Later, in the 1990s, research on professional development shifted to a focus on student learning, emphasizing problem solving and content knowledge (Martin et al., 2014). To date, much of teacher professional development opportunities continue to underscore enhancing student achievement.

Through the decades and shifts in professional learning goals, there have also been various transitions in the models for which such professional learning takes place—from workshop design, to mentoring programs, to professional learning communities, to online modules. These methods towards promoting the most authentic and meaningful professional learning experiences for teachers are constantly discussed and debated. For instance, an asset in one model may be missing in a second, whereas the second may present an asset that is non-existent in the first. Key literature regarding the search for effective professional development models are outlined in Table 1.
Table 1

*Effective Professional Development*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citations</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Sample/Methods</th>
<th>Findings/Outcomes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Martin, Kragler, Quatroche, and Bauserman (2014)</td>
<td>To present current knowledge on teacher professional development; inclusive of the effective and innovative practices that are being used</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Consultations with schools and administrations regarding the implementation of professional development programs suggested that professional development approaches that are reflective, active, collaborative, and substantive are the most effective.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon (2001)</td>
<td>To provide the first large-scale comparison of effects of different characteristics of professional development on teachers’ learning</td>
<td>National Sample of Mathematics and Science teachers ($n = 1027$); Quantitative</td>
<td>Results indicated that (a) a focus on content knowledge, (b) opportunities for active learning; and (c) coherence with other learning activities are the features of teacher professional development activities that have significant and positive effects on increases in knowledge, skills and changes in classroom practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desimone (2009)</td>
<td>To better understand how to best measure professional development, and its effects on teachers and students, toward the end of improving professional development programs and policies to foster better instruction and student achievement</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Research consensus concluded five main features of professional development that have been associated with changes in knowledge, practice, and student achievement. Content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation were the critical features that formed the basis of the framework proposed for studying the effectiveness of professional development.</td>
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Table 1

*Effective Professional Development*

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<th>Sample/Methods</th>
<th>Findings/Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ingvarson, Meiers and Beavis (2005)</td>
<td>To examine effects of structural and process features of professional development programs on teachers’ knowledge, practice, and efficacy</td>
<td>Teachers who participated in professional development activities through the Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme ($n = 3250$); Quantitative</td>
<td>The most important influence on reported impact on knowledge was the extent to which a program focuses on content. The most important influence on reported impact on practice was the extent to which programs provide opportunities for active learning and reflection on practice. The level of content focus and active learning as well as the opportunity to receive feedback all strongly influenced teacher efficacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mansour, EL-Deghaidy, Alshamrani, and Aldahmash (2014)</td>
<td>To investigate science teachers’ view of continuing professional development (CPD)</td>
<td>All science teachers in three educational administrations ($n = 3150$); Mixed Methods</td>
<td>Findings indicated that CPD should take place where teachers can collaborate with others in an authentic context and be able to talk with each other as part of the learning activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson and Berne (1999)</td>
<td>To examine the literature on teacher learning of professional knowledge, especially content knowledge</td>
<td>A total of eight studies reviewed</td>
<td>The future of research on teacher learning lies in the ability to weave together ideas of teacher learning, professional development, teacher knowledge, and student learning-areas that have largely operated independent of one another.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nonetheless, finding a recipe for bettering one’s self as an educator is no simple task.

Research reveals that teachers’ learning is a “complex process” that requires consideration be given to “the individual, the social and the organizational” aspects of a teacher’s professional domain (Cuesta, Azcárate, & Cardeñoso, 2016, p. 149). To account for such a complex process,
research over recent decades suggests that professional development activities should transition from isolated activities such as workshops, conferences, and advanced education courses to professional learning experiences that are ongoing, and job imbedded.

Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon (2001) conducted a study examining the relationship between features of professional development and teacher improvement. Participants in this quantitative study were of a national sample of mathematics and science teachers ($n = 1027$) enrolled in the Eisenhower Professional Development Program, a federal program which supports professional development for teachers, mainly in mathematics and science. For their analysis, data were taken from a Teacher Activity Survey, conducted as a part of a national evaluation of the program. Results indicated that (a) a focus on content knowledge, (b) opportunities for active learning; and (c) coherence with other learning activities are the features of teacher professional development activities that have significant and positive effects on increases in knowledge, skills and changes in classroom practice. The authors argue that “sustained and intensive professional development” (p. 935) is more likely to have an impact on teachers than professional development opportunities that span a short period of time. To that end, teachers reported their positive change in practice more as a result of what they refer to as reform activities (teacher collaboratives or networks, committees, study groups) than traditional activities like workshops or conferences (1.4 compared to 1.2, where 0 = no change and 3 = the highest degree of change). Therefore, if schools are serious about using professional development to foster an improvement of teachers’ professional practice, investments must be made in professional development opportunities that research shows foster such improvements.

Several additional studies also suggest that teachers’ professional development experiences can have a considerable and meaningful impact on teachers’ professional practice
(Desimone, 2009; Ingvarson, Meiers & Beavis, 2005) when they include specific features. For instance, Mansour, EL-Deghaidy, Alshamrani, and Aldahmash (2014), conducted a study to investigate science teachers’ view of continuing professional development. Participants of this mixed methods study were science teachers \((n = 3150)\) from three Saudi Arabian cities. Although the study explored continuing professional development issues grounded there, it did also consider issues that might impact developing effective professional development on an international level as well. Findings indicated that continuing professional development should take place where teachers can collaborate with others in an authentic context and be able to talk with each other as part of their learning activities. These findings suggest that teachers show greatest improvements in their practice when they have the opportunity to interact with colleagues because they can benefit from the varied and valuable perspectives of their peers.

Moreover, Ingvarson, Meiers & Beavis (2005), also conducted a study focusing on features of professional development experiences. Their study was conducted to examine the effects of structural and process features of professional development programs on teachers’ knowledge, practice, and efficacy. Participants in this quantitative study were teachers \((n = 3250)\) who engaged in professional development activities through the Australian Government Quality Teacher Programme. Through their survey study, Ingvarson et al. reported that the most important influence on reported impact on knowledge is the extent to which a program focuses on content and the most important influence on reported impact on practice is the extent to which programs provide opportunities for active learning and reflection on practice. It was also reported that the coupling of content focus with active learning and opportunities to receive feedback strongly influenced teacher efficacy. This finding indicated that systematic approaches
to professional learning should include active learning with a focus on content knowledge and time for feedback between colleagues.

Ultimately, literature on professional development suggests that continued development and active teacher learning are fundamental components to high-quality teaching and learning. Wilson and Berne (1999), in their overall examination of professional development models suggested that these most effective professional development opportunities require communities of learning where teachers take an active part, and trust is present among colleagues. This study aimed to uncover the best methods and models to such teacher learning and development.

**Collaborative Models of Professional Development.**

Dating back to the early 2000s, collaboration in educational environments has been the focus of many research studies, but a systematic approach towards teacher development through collaborative practices has been a newer addition to the literature (Martin et al., 2014). Recent studies focus on how the integration of socially collaborative learning experiences can help enhance teacher growth and provide evidence about the benefits that collaboration has on the improvement of teacher practice. Current key literature regarding collaborative models of professional development are outlined in Table 2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citations</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Sample/ Methods</th>
<th>Findings/Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nelson, Slavit, Perkins, and Hathorn (2008)</td>
<td>To better understand how to support secondary teachers’ engagement in collaborative inquiry</td>
<td>A group of professional development providers ($n = 12$); Narrative Case Study</td>
<td>Findings proved to be in support of teachers undertaking collaborative inquiry for professional growth when there is a reliance on collaborative norms, the use of dialogue structured by protocols, a distribution of leadership responsibilities, and the co-construction of an inquiry focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charner-Laird, Kirkpatrick, Szczesiul, Watson, and Gordon (2016)</td>
<td>To explore teachers' experiences of collegial interactions</td>
<td>Novice teachers ($n = 17$) who graduated from the same university-based teacher education program; Qualitative</td>
<td>Findings indicated that only those who experience critical dialogue actively engage in deep conversations about their teaching practice and have the potential to gain the necessary learning and support for success and retention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuesta, Azcárate, and Cardeñoso (2016)</td>
<td>To determine and understand the professional development processes resulting from a continued education program</td>
<td>Novice secondary education teachers ($n = 12$); Case Study</td>
<td>The study demonstrated the need for teamwork, debate, and reflection to facilitate change and influence the professional development of teachers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As school systems begin to implement professional learning communities (PLCs) as structures for teacher learning, it is evident that administrators find value and potential in collaborative structures as a means to elicit teacher growth. Accordingly, Nelson, Slavit, Perkins, and Hathorn (2008) conducted a study with the purpose of gaining a better understanding of how to support secondary teachers’ engagement in collaborative inquiry. Participants of this qualitative study were a group of professional development providers \( (n = 12) \) from Partnerships for Reform in Secondary Science and Mathematics (PRiSSM), a 3-year professional development project funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Using a narrative case study research design model, researchers examined what this group of professional development providers learned about cultivating and maintaining a culture of collaboration. Researchers examined the evolution of the professional development group over approximately 18 months, from its inception to halfway through the project’s duration. During this time, data were collected, including interviews and archived documents, as well as video and audio recordings of meetings. This data collection process targeted the developmental phase of the group and the critical decisions that impacted the group moving forward. Data analysis provided insight into the structures and processes that support collaborative professional development experiences. These structures and processes include “an explicit reliance on collaborative norms and explicitly using processes such as dialogue structured by protocols, distributing leadership responsibilities, and co-constructing an inquiry focus” (Nelson et al., 2008, p. 1270). Ultimately, these findings build a case for the support needed by teachers undertaking collaborative inquiry for professional growth. Acknowledging that teacher growth is a complex process provides the reminder that the process requires cognitively stimulating practices that occur through well-

Charner-Laird et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study to investigate new teachers’ \((n = 17)\) collaborative learning experiences within their first year of teaching; after graduating from the same university-based teacher education program. Data collection included two semi-structured, one-hour interviews with each participant. Researchers utilized a semi-structured interview protocol containing open-ended questions that asked participants to reflect on their experiences as they came into teaching. First-round interviews took place just after teacher education program graduation and revealed that most hoped to settle into teaching jobs with collegial and collaborative environments. Second-round interviews took place by the end of participants’ first year of teaching. Semi-structured interview protocol questions were drafted to investigate the different schools in which participants took jobs and whether those schools supported collegiality and collaboration. Data analysis revealed the importance of different types of collegial interactions.

More specifically, while most participants were satisfied with the collegial interactions within their new school environments, “their roles in these interactions varied, as did their descriptions of the potential the interactions had in helping them critically examine and improve their pedagogy” (Charner-Laird et al., 2016, p. 5). It was reported that only those who genuinely engaged in critical dialogue experienced essential learning, support for success, and retention. These findings suggest providing not only novice teachers, but all teachers, with meaningful learning opportunities, inclusive of critical dialogue gleaned from collaborative environments, will benefit the teaching and learning that takes place in educational institutions.
At the core of teacher growth, this work helps to solidify the need for schools to incorporate collaborative learning opportunities for teachers. Providing teachers of all experience levels meaningful learning experiences, such as the participation in collaborative enterprises, is likely to show promise in a growth of practice.

Cuesta, Azcárate, and Cardeñoso (2016) also speak to this in their research as they sought to understand and determine the professional development processes resulting from a continued education program. Gathered from this continued education program, participants in their study were novice secondary education teachers \( (n = 12) \) in the science specialties. Through case study research methods, Cuesta et al. used several sources of evidence in the development of their findings. These sources included observations, recordings, field notes, diaries, documents, interviews, and questionnaires in response to two scenarios. First, data were gathered at work sessions of the team of educators, eleven work sessions in total. Second, data were gathered at training sessions of participating teachers, twenty training sessions in total. From those sessions, it was necessary to reduce the quantity of data by selecting manageable units of information. After that cleansing process, Cuesta et al. found that the factors leading to the greatest advancements in teacher development included the teachers’ recognition of their own needs, the teachers’ positive attitude towards dealing with those needs, and the dynamic of collaboration. While these observations made by Cuesta et al. prevented them from making any simple generalizations, they offered this understanding of the multiple factors that attribute to a beginning teacher’s professional growth, most notably being collaborative professional growth experiences. For example, the study demonstrated the need for teamwork, debate, and reflection to facilitate change and influence the professional development of teachers. Although the
process of change and growth can generally be described as a non-linear process, the work of Cuesta et al. suggests that collaboration is an extremely valuable part of such a process.

To that end, Fullan (2001) stresses the importance of collaboration as a means of supporting adult learning. In his book, *Leading in a Culture of Change*, Fullan (2001) states, “…the organization must frame the giving and receiving of knowledge as a responsibility and must reinforce such sharing” through a collaborative culture (p. 86). In closing, it is imperative that school leaders must guide their teachers’ understanding of how their school’s collaborative model will be defined and what criteria will be used to determine its overall impact.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided a review of literature as it relates to the current study. Accordingly, this review of literature began with a discussion of the review process, followed by the theoretical framework grounding the study. The chapter was then subsequently divided into two additional sections discussing professional development and, more specifically, collaborative models of professional development.

Yet, despite the considerable body of literature devoted to professional development, few studies explore how teachers perceive collaborative professional growth experiences. Special attention should be given to teachers’ responsibility to enhance their own professional practice and the factors that lead to their own professional growth. With the shift to collaborative professional growth models becoming more apparent in schools, it is imperative that teacher voices on such topics be documented and shared. The research conducted in this study helps to fill such gaps in the literature.

Based upon the theoretical framework outlined and built upon the additional findings documented, three research questions were crafted to further explore adult learning and the
professional growth of teachers. Chapter Three presents the research questions investigated within the present study.

The research described in the pages that follow provide a great deal of support of collaborative professional learning, highlighting a specific model put into practice. In addition, the research design and methodology are detailed. Among other facets, a discussion describing participants, the setting, data collection, and analysis are included.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the participants’ perspectives of teacher collaboration, inclusive of dialogue and reflection, and the influence it has on enhancing one’s professional practice in a K-12 learning environment. Specifically, this study focused on exploring the practice of teachers who regularly engage in collaborative learning groups. This chapter provides the methodology used to conduct this study. First, this chapter includes a biography of the researcher followed by the research questions and research design. Later, a description of the setting, participants, and sampling procedures, as well as a description of instrumentation is provided. Then, the method of data analysis is outlined and followed by a summary of the data collection timeline. This chapter concludes with a statement of ethics.

Researcher Biography

Personal bias has the potential to influence a research experience. Therefore, a researcher biography is provided in an effort to reveal any biases that have the potential to affect the data collection and data analysis process.

Since the fall of 2009, the researcher has worked as a high school mathematics teacher in a suburban area of western Connecticut, partnering her passion for lifelong learning, teaching and mathematics with her passion for spending quality time with adolescents. She instills high expectations in her students by encouraging them to embrace a positive attitude and open mind to mathematics. In return, she shares her enthusiasm and support when working through the skills, importance, value and beauty of mathematics with her students. As an active professional in the field of secondary education, she demonstrates to her students how they can apply classroom practices to the world at large.
In working to impose these best practices for teaching and learning, she found value in turning to research. Since the fall of 2015, as she began working to pursue her Doctorate in Instructional Leadership at Western Connecticut State University, she has been exposed to an enormity of qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods research studies that inform, enhance and enlighten her current teaching and learning practices. The research she has read has not only allowed her to implement new strategies in her own classroom, but also prepare articles and meaningful presentations to share her wealth of new knowledge with other active professionals.

As she began to consider her own research interests, she decided to turn to qualitative research methods. She believed that the data collection involved in qualitative research could provide her with the best opportunities to engage in an exploratory form of inquiry, affording herself significant interaction with research participants and providing her with an in-depth picture of her unit of study.

As a lifelong learner and active professional, she continues to learn what best practices she can engage in to be the best educator she can be. At the time of this research, her interests directed her towards learning about the benefits of collaboration as a form of teacher development. Because she had some experience participating in professional learning communities (PLCs) and saw the potential for meaningful professional growth due to those experiences, she saw benefit in shifting current professional learning practices in the direction of collaborative professional development experiences for teachers. In short, she hoped to understand how all teachers can work collaboratively at solving problems and answering questions while promoting reflection, openness, and adult learning. This research journey described in the pages that follow is hoped to provide not only the researcher, but all parties
invested in education, with a gateway to best understand perceptions of teachers as they work towards enhancing their professional practice.

**Research Questions**

This qualitative research study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do teachers view their responsibility to enhance their own professional practice?
2. How do teachers view their participation in collaborative learning groups?
3. What factors lead to a teacher’s own professional growth?

**Description of the Research Design**

This research study used a qualitative approach because it was most relevant to address the research questions at an exploratory level of understanding how teachers enhance their professional practice. At the onset of this research study, the literature relating to how teachers engage in such meaningful professional learning experiences and the factors leading to a teacher’s own professional growth was limited. If stakeholders want to see teachers participate meaningfully in improving their practice, they need to rely on research about how schools can promote such purposeful and productive teacher development opportunities. Qualitative research methods, specifically generic qualitative research, allowed for the extension to this conversation.

Numerous scholars provide their rationale behind the use of qualitative research methods as a suitable means to interpreting the experiences of groups of people. For example, Glesne (2006) shared that qualitative research methods allow readers to understand social phenomena from the perspectives of participants, to contextualize issues within participant settings, and sometimes to transform or change social conditions at large. Moreover, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) stated that qualitative research methods consist of a series of depictions inclusive of field
notes, interviews, memos to the self, and recordings that make the world visible and can then transform the world. Weinberg (2002) further elaborated that qualitative research is an activity that is interpretive of the phenomena of the voices and experiences of the participants. To that end, this study offered the perspectives of participants, making their collaborative professional growth experience visible in literature with the potential to transform experiences for others.

To explore the lived experiences of teachers engaged in collaborative learning, the researcher turned specifically to generic qualitative research, which is “not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the known qualitative methodologies” (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003, p. 2). The processes of generic qualitative research described by Merriam (2009) were best suited for this research.

As a generic qualitative research study, this study sought to discover and understand the perspectives of the people involved (Merriam, 1998). Using generic qualitative methods, this study aimed to provide a rich description of the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 2009). These aims were exploratory in working to understand participants’ perspectives of teacher collaboration and the influence it has on enhancing one’s professional practice. Conducting such qualitative research allowed participants to share their in-depth experiences and have their voices heard (Merriam, 2009).

**Description of the Research Setting**

This research study was conducted at Charlie Charming School (pseudonym), a co-educational, K-12, college-preparatory school located in the western region of Connecticut. As one of the eight private/parochial schools of its district, Charlie Charming School was founded before the Depression, with approximately 95% of its faculty holding advanced degrees. Students travel from more than 40 towns to attend this nationally accredited institution. Charlie
Charming School offers their commitment to making tuition affordable and pride themselves on their innovative practices that allow for personalized and meaningful experiences for all. Charlie Charming School has approximately 50-70 teachers working with close to 400 students across grades K-12. All grade levels average less than 14 students per class.

The selection of this site was based on a recommendation from a teacher employed at the Charlie Charming School, who shared that she believed Charlie Charming School would welcome the research study. Because the educators at Charlie Charming School engage collaboratively with one another in an effort to enhance their professional practice, it was an appropriate setting to gather information related to improving teacher practice and the emphasis of lifelong learning through collaborative practices.

In their efforts at becoming a more progressive learning environment that encompasses a culture of thinking and learning, in 2013, under the direction of a new head of school, Charlie Charming School first implemented its collaborative learning groups. From August 2013 to June of 2018, collaborative learning groups focused their time on thinking routines and documentation of student thinking. Adapted from the work of Richhart, Church, and Morrison (2011) titled *Making Thinking Visible*, in August 2013, Charlie Charming School adapted what they called a “Tuning Protocol” and a “Looking at Student Thinking (LAST) Protocol” to help structure and organize this work. Although this research study did not take place at a time in which these protocols were utilized, the reasoning for their mentioning helps to demonstrate how Charlie Charming School teachers first started collaborating and learning from one another.

During its first year of implementation, collaborative learning groups only met when administration could bring them together, by convenience or by chance. Beginning in the 2014-2015 school year, collaborative learning group time was built into the school schedule. Every
Wednesday, from 8:00 to 9:00 a.m., teachers met in collaborative learning groups, building in a late student start time of 9:00 a.m. This change was based upon an outside consultant’s recommendation that built-in time was needed to truly see growth and benefits from collaborative learning group time.

From August 2013 to June 2018, Charlie Charming School’s teachers were organized into groups of approximately 10. These collaborative learning groups were diversified in their design, as each was inclusive of first-year or beginning teachers to veteran teachers, across grades K-12. Within these groups, teachers gathered under their learning group facilitator to engage in professional learning. Facilitators were Charlie Charming School’s teachers chosen based on teacher choice and/or need for additional professional experience. During that five-year period, groups basically stayed the same, aside from transitions for movement of new teachers.

Beginning October 2018, Charlie Charming School shifted its learning group focus to developing competency maps, standards, and skills for each department. With that shift, came a new set of collaborative learning groups. This transition brought on nine learning groups organized by department: math, science, humanities, technology, fine arts, performing arts, world language, lower school, and bridge program. Learning group facilitators were department heads. At the time of this research study, the smallest of the collaborative learning groups was comprised of two people, and the largest of the groups was composed of 10 people. In total, 56 of Charlie Charming’s School teachers were in collaborative learning groups during the 2018-2019 school year.
Instrumentation

To gather the most comprehensive perspectives of teachers participating in collaborative learning groups at Charlie Charming School, four data collection methods were used in order to triangulate information by capturing different dimensions of the same phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). The current study’s instruments consisted of a researcher-created teacher questionnaire, non-participant observations, and interviews. These instruments are explained below.

Teacher questionnaire

A teacher questionnaire was developed by the researcher for three purposes. The first was to collect general demographic information about the potential study participants, such as highest degree earned, and number of years spent teaching. This aided in the researcher’s efforts to gather a diverse sample. Second, to collect information regarding teacher perceptions of professional development and teacher growth, such as what constitutes the best of professional development experiences. This offered the researcher information to add to preexisting literature. Third, to determine who of Charlie Charming School’s teachers would be willing to be interviewed. The researcher, with the review of her research committee, developed a nine-question teacher questionnaire to obtain these three purposes.

The first four questions pertained to demographic information while the three that followed focused on teacher perceptions of professional development and teacher growth. The eighth question was, “Would you be willing to let the researcher contact you for an interview to discuss your school’s collaborative learning group process?” The ninth and final question was, “If you responded ‘Yes’ to being contacted for an interview, please include your name here.” It was anticipated that the questionnaire would take 15- to 30-minutes to complete, and the researcher did not hear otherwise from her participants.
Ultimately, this instrument not only aided in the researcher’s efforts to gather her participants, but it also allowed for the researcher to gather additional valuable quotations later included in Chapters Four and Five of this dissertation. The responses made by participants on their teacher questionnaires added to the thick, rich descriptions of their perceptions and experiences related to enhancing their professional practice. A copy of the questionnaire is found in Appendix A.

**Non-participant observations using field notes**

The second method of data collection was observation which allowed the researcher to experience a phenomenon in concrete situations and settings with the goal of understanding the phenomenon and making meaning from it (Merriam, 1998). As a non-participating observer, the researcher immersed herself in the collaborative learning that took place at Charlie Charming School by attending a total of six learning group meetings: two meetings per three learning groups. The researcher, advised by her research committee, determined that two observations would allow considerable opportunities for gathering results to her research questions. On the first of the two observations, the researcher focused on understanding how issues are discussed, and what general format is followed. On the second round, researcher’s attention also included the dynamics and contributions of the selected group of participants, who are later introduced in the sampling procedures.

Researcher’s field notes served as the storehouse for all the observed data in her field research (Merriam, 1998). Two types of hand-written field notes were maintained: descriptive and reflective. The descriptive field notes included portraits of the learning process, reconstructions of dialogue relevant to the process, descriptions of the physical settings, accounts of particular events and times, as well as the depiction of activities and participants’ seating.
arrangements. The reflective field notes included, “the researcher’s feelings, reactions, hunches, initial interpretations, and speculations” (Merriam, 2009, p. 131). Using field notes to collect this observation data gave the researcher an opportunity to gather all detailed descriptions, paraphrased quotations, self-reflections, and profound thoughts in one place to later aid in researcher analysis.

**Semi-structure, in-depth interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the lived experiences of individuals engaging in collaborative professional growth experiences, and in turn, to make meaning of those experiences. For that purpose, the researcher developed an interview protocol with semi-structured questions. They included a mix of open ended and structured questions to allow interviewers to build upon and explore interviewees’ responses to questions as suggested by Merriam (1998). The interview protocol (Appendix B), included general queries about the teachers’ perceptions about professional development and their roles in a collaborative learning process. The follow-up probes also elicited participants reflections of their experience and understanding of collaborative practices for enhancing professional growth.

To ensure that participants were able to best understand the researcher, and therefore have the opportunity to elaborate fully, the open-ended interview questions and follow-up probes were written neutrally, as not to lead the interviewees to respond in any predetermined way. For instance, one interview question was, “How do you view your responsibility to enhance your own professional practice?” The follow-up probes to this particular question were, “How do you value professional development? How does your school/administration play into this responsibility? How do you determine your professional development goals? What motivates you to engage in professional development?”
The interview questions and probes were first reviewed with the researcher’s committee of advisors who have experience with the process of in-depth, semi-structure interviewing. The protocol was then revised in accordance with these experts’ suggestions.

The benefit of using a semi-structure approach allowed the researcher to examine the concrete experiences of Charlie Charming School’s teachers engaged in the phenomena in question in a meaningful way because it offered an opportunity for the researcher to ask follow-up probing questions in reaction to initial responses. To that end, this instrument was used to understand the experiences of those who were interviewed, but not to predict or to control the research experience (Merriam, 1998). The development and implementation of this instrument gave the researcher the chance to really hear participants’ stories and their elaborations. To that end, these interviews allowed reflection of the study’s research questions and the opportunity to probe further into experiences from the collaborative sessions observed.

**Sampling Procedures and Participants**

Based on the purpose of this study and its theoretical lens, participant selection was carefully considered (Merriam, 1998). Sampling procedures leading to the participants ($n = 10$) of this study came in four phases. A visual representation to model the four phases of sampling discussed in the sections that follow can be seen in Figure 1.
In order to gather the most comprehensive understanding of how teachers’ view their responsibility to enhance their own professional practice, including their participation in collaborative learning groups, the participants of this research study were gathered from Charlie Charming School’s teachers who were members of collaborative learning groups during their 2018-2019 school year. These 56 teachers comprised the population from which the current study’s participants were selected. No other inclusion criteria were identified prior to the selection of this population.

**Sampling Phase Two**

In order to begin her next phase of sampling, permission was obtained from the head of school (Appendix C). The researcher then introduced herself and her research interests to the population via email (Appendix D). The introductory email documented that the head of school gave permission for the researcher to observe the *process* of collaborative learning that was occurring at Charlie Charming School. Even though the researcher only intended to observe the
process and not the individuals themselves, the researcher’s committee found it necessary for the researcher to gain consent (Appendix E) from all teachers in an observed learning group.

One of Charlie Charming School’s teachers, Tanya (pseudonym), met with the researcher to get the teacher consent forms for distribution. These forms were organized into one folder per collaborative learning group \((n = 9)\) for each collaborative learning group facilitator \((n = 9)\) to distribute to members of their learning group. These forms were distributed, signed, and re-collected by facilitators during learning group meeting time. Tanya then re-collected all folders and returned them to the researcher.

After this initial round of seeking consent, the researcher received consent from 26 Charlie Charming School’s teachers. This initial round did not result in any full small learning group consent. A second and third round of consent-seeking served as a reminder for those Charlie Charming School’s teachers who had not yet responded. After a second round of seeking consent, where facilitators redistributed consent forms to those who did not sign the first time, the researcher gained consent from an additional 11 Charlie Charming School’s teachers. At that point, the researcher was just shy of consent from three full learning groups. The researcher then emailed the four Charlie Charming School’s teachers that would allow her to have consent from three full learning groups. Once the researcher received consent from those remaining four teachers, the researcher had consent from three full learning groups and a total of 41 teachers. Those 41 teachers were asked to complete the brief researcher-designed teacher questionnaire. Ultimately, this phase of sampling left the researcher with three learning groups \((n = 3)\) to observe.
**Sampling Phase Three**

The next phase of participant selection required that each of the 41 teachers agreeing to consent complete the teacher questionnaire through Google Forms. 25 teachers submitted their questionnaires. When asked, “Would you be willing to let the researcher contact you for an interview to discuss your school’s collaborative learning group process?”, the teacher had to respond, “Yes,” to be considered for participation. The researcher chose to seek nominations for interviews because it was important that the researcher conducted interviews that were as information-rich as possible (Merriam, 2009). This phase of sampling left the researcher with 19 teachers willing to be interviewed.

**Sampling Phase Four**

Before contacting and determining participants to be included in a study, it is customary to determine criteria for participant selection (Merriam, 2009). The researcher was purposeful in her selection of the interviewees. Because the researcher wanted to discover, understand, and gain insight, she selected her interviewees from whom the most could be learned (Merriam, 2009). That is to say that the interviewees were gathered from the three learning groups to be observed (See Table 3). This final phase of sampling left the researcher with 10 interviewees.

**Table 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Group</th>
<th>Interviewees (n = 10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants

The 10 interviewees became the participants of this study. These 10 participants were ultimately selected not only because of their willingness to be interviewed and their ability to represent all three learning groups observed, but also in the researcher’s attempt to represent diversity among those who were willing. The interviewees’ demographic information, representing this diversity, is seen in Table 4. Additional consent was received from those who were interviewed (Appendix F).

Table 4

Participants’ Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Group</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Years Teaching</th>
<th>Years at Charlie Charming</th>
<th>Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lucas</td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Tanya</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brittany</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>0-2</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Logan</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>Masters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

Data collection was initiated by a review of questionnaire responses. Additional data collection included observing three collaborative learning groups in action and conducting one
individual semi-structured interview with each participant. Later, the researcher revisited participants’ questionnaire responses and conducted follow-up procedures. All data collection was enacted with the intent to gather the most information about the lived experiences and resulting perceptions of teachers enhancing their professional practice.

First, administration of teacher questionnaires was fulfilled to ascertain who was going to participate in the study, as described in the sampling procedures above. In total, 25 questionnaires were returned. Of those 25 respondents, 19 responded, “yes” to being contacted for an interview, of which 10 were later interviewed. Only the questionnaire responses of the 10 interviewees, otherwise participants, were considered for further analysis.

The researcher then began her non-participant observations. The researcher attended each of the three learning group’s two meetings for their full duration of 60 minutes, 8:00 to 9:00 on Wednesday mornings. The researcher emailed the three learning group facilitators individually to schedule her observations between the months of February and May 2019. The observations took place over this four-month period to accommodate the schedules of both the researcher and Charlie Charming School’s teachers. A sample email sent to the facilitator of learning group three regarding the scheduling of their two observations can be found in Appendix G.

During all six observations, the researcher sat just outside the learning groups, within ear shot. An example of one learning group’s seating arrangement, including the researcher, can be seen in Figure 2.
The researcher’s organized field notes were kept in a small spiral-bound notebook throughout this data gathering process. A typed copy of a sample of researcher descriptive field notes can be seen in Figure 3. The handwritten copy of this sample can be found in Appendix H.
31:00
P: “Didn’t have anything meaningful to share then, but do now…”
   • Shares experience of student choice, small groups (mini lesson vs. workshop)
K: “Why not one big group?”
P: “Feels less teacher centered.”
   • Discusses less/no homework
   • A nods; K “mmhmm”, S taking notes – all showing eye contact
34:40
K: “What I’m wondering…”
P: “Feeling it out…”
   • A and K giggles and nods
A sharing with lots of eye contact; others looking on and K “right”, giggle, “mmhmm”; A mentions connects to P
39:00
A: “Assess how?”
P: “Same problem”
   • Shares what she is doing
   • “Thing that I struggle with”
      o Grade that rewards behavior
40:00
K makes suggestion
P “I like that!”
* Alarm goes off *
41:00
P suggestion for progress report
   • All 3 write note of it!
K: “Think its VIP for student to assess…”
42:00
K: “Didn’t look forward to big group!”

Figure 3. A sample of researcher descriptive field notes.

The researcher’s reflective field notes were written at the conclusion of each observation in a private room. The researcher used a red pen to write these reflective thoughts. Within the researcher’s spiral-bound notebook, descriptive field notes were written on every left-hand side page and any reflective field notes relevant to the left-hand side page were written on the page to its right-hand side. A typed copy of a sample of this work can be seen in Figure 4.
Figure 4. A sample of researcher descriptive and reflective field notes.

Additionally, the researcher used a purple pen to underline descriptive observation notes that she anticipated would develop into themes during data analysis. Later, during data analysis, the researcher used different colored highlighters to highlight key descriptive observation data that modeled emergent themes. Figures 3 and 4 also demonstrate some of this data analysis work.

After each first round of observation, participants were individually contacted by the researcher via email to schedule an interview during a mutually agreed upon time. A sample email sent to a participant for interview scheduling can be found in Appendix I. All 10 interviews took place in an empty room on the Charlie Charming School campus between the months of February and April 2019. At the onset of each interview, the researcher reminded the interviewees of the confidentially assured through participation, and the value of their
contributions to the research. The researcher also asked permission to record the interviews. Interview times ranged from 25-to-60 minutes.

Interviews were recorded using the researcher’s iPhone through a free application called Otter. This application allowed the researcher to record each interview and generate real-time streaming transcriptions that she then immediately downloaded and saved to her Google drive. Later, the researcher printed each interview and its data was transcribed for further analysis.

In the summer months of 2019, the researcher revisited her observation field notes, after coding interviews and identifying emergent themes. Because the researcher’s field notes were written with such rich detail and description, she was able to find connections between what she gathered from her observations with what she took away from her interviewees’ responses. Nonetheless, in June 2019, the researcher met with Tanya at a mutually agreed upon location to gather a small amount of additional information and to ask a few clarifying questions. The clarifying questions asked of Tanya were mostly related to questions the researcher had of comments made by participants during observations. The researcher did not find it necessary to meet with any other participants because Tanya was able to answer all researcher clarifying questions. However, the researcher did invite participants to review interview transcriptions for the purpose of member checking (Merriam, 1998). No participants indicated any interest in reviewing their interview transcripts.

The notions, generalities and analyses gathered from all data collection methods was found to be extremely useful in generating results and gathering recommendations for further research. Detailed researcher results are discussed in Chapter Four. Implications and recommendations are discussed in Chapter Five.
Data Analysis

To answer the study’s three research questions, when analyzing the data gathered, the researcher moved from the raw data she collected to meaningful emergent themes. Participants’ responses to the online questionnaire and interview questions, as well as the data gathered through observations were condensed to create focused and organized data for analysis.

The researcher selected inductive analysis as her strategy for analyzing and later interpreting the gathered data as defined by Saldaña (2009). Saldaña explains that the analysis process should include conducting initial coding procedures, then revisiting and refining those initial codes to develop an initial list of categories. These categories would then be subject to refinement and modification. Lastly, categories would lead to patterns revealing emergent themes. Saldaña then suggests that there may be relationships between and among the entirety of data resulting in assertions. This data analysis process is described in even greater detail in Chapter Four.

Providing thick description is critical in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). To accomplish that goal, first, the researcher spent a total of approximately 25 hours, over a spread of multiple days, to transcribe interview data. Researcher transcriptions involved close observation of interview data through repeated careful listening of audio-recorded transcriptions, repeated review of their corresponding printed transcripts, and careful editing based upon detailed notes written during each interview. This familiarity with the collected interview data and diligent attention to what was actually gathered from interviewees facilitated realizations and themes that emerged during this data analysis process.

During the coding process, the researcher examined all three sources of data to identify patterns, reoccurring ideas or phrases, and commonalities between and among data sources and
participants. In the end, the coding process served as an analytic tool to help explain the data, allowing the researcher to reconstruct codes as needed, and then to probe further about the meaning of the gathered data (Saldaña, 2009).

The researcher started her coding process by coding her participant interviews by hand. To complete this stage of data analysis, the researcher used the printed interview transcripts. Although each participant was assigned a pseudonym for the purpose of confidentiality, the researcher found it helpful for organizational purposes and quick reference to print each learning groups’ transcripts on different colored paper. This color coding also gave the researcher the opportunity to note if themes were specific to anyone learning group or generalizable to all three learning groups.

The transcripts for learning group one were printed on white paper while the transcripts for learning group two were printed on pink paper, and the transcripts for learning group three were printed on purple paper. After printing transcripts, the researcher tagged interviewee responses relevant to each research question using different color tags. All interviewee responses relevant to research question one were tagged with a blue tag, while responses relevant to question two were tagged in yellow, and those relevant to question three were tagged in green. Data that the researcher felt prompted to quote directly was given an additional orange tag. Red tags were specific to recommendations. This is documented in Figure 5.
This stage of coding interview transcripts was followed by an in-depth examination of the two other sources of data. This method of triangulation served to expand, as well as highlight and confirm, the initial set of codes derived from the interview transcripts. To undergo this stage of data analysis, the researcher highlighted responses to the teacher questionnaires and descriptive field notes that aligned with the themes found across interview transcripts. Through this process, the researcher gradually established generalizations that explained consistencies across data sources. This analytical process was completed for each research question separately.

Data Collection Timeline

The following procedures were followed (See Figure 6):
Figure 6. A visual representation of data collection procedures and timeline.

Statement of Ethics

Prior to beginning this research, the researcher’s dissertation proposal was approved in October 2018 by Western Connecticut State University and approval from the IRB was received in November 2018. Additionally, the researcher holds a valid Human Subjects certificate.

Upon IRB approval, a verbal approval was first sought from and granted by Charlie Charming’s Head of School. A signed consent form was then received from the Head of School, before Charlie Charming School’s teachers were contacted by e-mail and asked to give their written consent to participate in the study. All participants from this institution were voluntary
and did not receive compensation of any kind. Confidentiality for the institution and all participants was provided through the use of pseudonyms.

All data were collected by this researcher. The data were preserved in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer. Codes were assigned to participant responses and these data were only available to researchers related to the study for the purposes of data verification, coding, and qualitative data analysis. An internal audit of all data was conducted with the researcher’s advisor.
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the participants’ perspectives of teacher collaboration, inclusive of dialogue and reflection, and the influence it has on enhancing one’s professional practice in a K-12 learning environment. In particular, this research examined the experience of teachers who participated in formal collaborative learning groups to discuss issues and solve problems. Using phenomenological research methods, the researcher was able “to investigate the meaning of the lived experiences of people to identify the core essence of human experience as described by research participants” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 48). Specifically, this chapter provides the analysis of the data collected as well as detailed explanations of the results to each of the three research questions first introduced in Chapter Three:

1. How do teachers view their responsibility to enhance their own professional practice?
2. How do teachers view their participation in collaborative learning groups?
3. What factors lead to a teacher’s own professional growth?

Description of Data

The results of this study are based on the analysis of information gleaned from four data sources- an online questionnaire, non-participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and follow-up procedures. Data collection took place from January to June 2019 and included initial review of 25 questionnaire responses, observations of three collaborative learning groups on two different occasions, and 10 interviews with follow-up questioning as needed. Only the questionnaire responses of the 10 interviewees, otherwise participants, were considered for further analysis. These primary sources provided an opportunity for triangulation among data collection methods.
Data Analysis

The data analysis process, as described by Saldaña (2009), was comprised of multiple phases per each of the three research questions: first and second cycle coding, the establishment of categories, and the grouping of categories into themes. Ultimately, data analysis led to two assertions.

Coding Procedures

First cycle coding methods are the preliminary coding methods that serve to organize raw data (Saldaña, 2009). For the purposes of this study, the researcher utilized initial coding as described by Saldaña for her first cycle coding method. Initial coding can be defined as, “an open-ended approach to coding in which the researcher codes for their first impression words or phrases in response to engaging the datum” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 4). Initial coding gave the researcher the opportunity to start the process of deep reflection on the contents of the data, break it down into discrete parts, and examine for similarities and differences. During this first cycle, more than 150 codes were generated to organize the information over the three research questions (See Table 5).

Table 5

First Cycle Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Number of Initial Codes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
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<td>Three</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Second cycle coding served to develop a sense of conceptual organization and coherence from first cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009). For the purposes of this study, the researcher utilized pattern coding as described by Saldaña for her second cycle coding method. This more advanced way of reorganizing and reanalyzing the data coded through first cycle methods allowed for pulling together material into even more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis. Ultimately, pattern coding helped to accomplish the researcher’s goal of “grouping into a smaller number of sets” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69).

The researcher’s final list of codes was then grouped into categories, per research question. Saldaña (2009) indicates that, “Some use the terms code and category interchangeably and even in combination when they are, in fact, two separate components of data analysis” (p. 8). As the researcher gathered the codes together due to regularity and similarity, the development of categories, and therefore analysis of their connections came to fruition (Saldaña, 2009). It is important to document that the categories of this research study contained clusters of coded data that deserved even further refinement, into subcategories (Saldaña, 2009).

The researcher came to identify two categories for research question one, that were then refined into four subcategories. Research question two yielded three categories made up of seven subcategories. The one category of research question three was comprised of three subcategories. In total, the researcher came to six categories further refined to fourteen categories. Overall, these six categories revealed three emergent themes, one per research question. Each theme attempts to systematically link all categories and subcategories (Saldaña, 2009). A road map documenting this coming to themes can be found in Figure 7. This road map is adapted from a streamlined codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry as presented by
Saldaña (2009). Additionally, a frequency table to best illustrate this coding process can be found in Appendix J.
Figure 7. Themes
Ultimately, these three themes are best summarized into two assertions. The two assertions attempt to progress from the particulars of each research question to the general of the study context. To that end, assertions progress from the particular to the general “by predicting patterns of what may be observed and what may happen in similar present and future contexts” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 13). A second road map documenting this coming to two assertions can be found in Figure 8.
Figure 8. Assertions

Theme One
Intrinsic Motivation

Assertion One
Teachers motivated by their own love of learning and desire to grow enter a professional setting where they can take ownership of their growth process through predictable schedules.

Theme Two
Positive Participation

Assertion Two
All professional growth experiences should be an opportunity for teachers to experience active listening, purposeful dialogue, and reflection.

Theme Three
Cognitive Processes

Category
Love of Teaching and Learning

Category
Commitment to Growth

Category
Group Ownership

Category
Structure

Category
Perceived Benefits

Category
Factors
In the following sections, the emergent themes and categories among them are explained in depth in reference to the three research questions. The data used to support each of these themes were categorized to denote the data source as illustrated in Table 6. Supporting participant quotations ground the data analysis and theme development and is representative of the participants, unless otherwise noted.

Table 6

*Source of Participant Information Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
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<tbody>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Participant Observation</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-Structured Interview</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Research Question One Results**

**Theme One: Intrinsic Motivation**

When trying to understand how teachers view their responsibility to enhance their own professional practice, the research showed that teachers appeared to be intrinsically motivated to improve and understand teaching and learning. Motivation is explained by these two categories—teachers’ professed love of teaching and learning and their commitment towards growth.

**Love of teaching and learning.** All data sources pointed to the idea that enhancing one’s professional practice comes from a passion for teaching as well as ongoing curiosity for learning. This incessant passion and enduring curiosity can be defined by the researcher’s category title: a love of teaching and learning.
**Passion.** Most visible across interviews with participants was their passion about teaching. It was the teachers’ need to find joy in what they were doing or become an impassioned teacher that motivated them towards seeking ways to better themselves and their teaching experiences. For example, when directly asked, “How do you view your responsibility to enhance your own professional practice?” Donna responded by saying, “Being able to enjoy what I’m doing. Because if I don’t enjoy it, then I’m not going to want to keep making it better” (I, Donna). Additionally, Logan shared, “I just like, I love learning” (I, Logan). Adding to that point was Richard’s discussion of his need for challenge as a means for personal growth. He explained his prior experiences that ultimately led him to Charlie Charming School. He voiced that he had to make a change in his professional teaching career, because it “dawned on” him that he was becoming what he “hated most, which is a teacher just waiting for the end” (I, Richard). Richard hit a point in his previous teaching experience that left him no longer feeling passionate about what he was doing, and he admitted that the only way to make his practice better was to make a change. Richard made it clear that lacking that passion halted the enhancement of his professional practice.

Most interestingly, Laura included her passion for taking on other hobbies outside of teaching, such as traveling, to have the most significant impact on making her professional practice better. During her interview, Laura shared, “I am well rounded in other things, other than just my job. I feel like that’s very important. And I feel like it makes me a better teacher” (I, Laura).

**Curiosity.** Coupled with this passion was the teachers’ own curiosity, which accounted for their intrinsic motivation for on-going professional development. Discussions across collaborative learning groups included phrases like, “I’m excited to hear your thoughts,” (O2,
Learning Group One) and “What I wonder is…” (O1, Learning Group Two). Conversations amongst collaborative learning groups flourished with responses to such curiosities demonstrating how this curiosity leads to growth in their practice. To this point, when discussing with Tanya her takeaway from an observed collaborative discussion, she shared, “Professionally, I feel like always being curious and open to change is important” (I, Tanya). When Tanya was asked to elaborate on this point, she stated, “I know for me, personally, I get really excited about trying new things. And if you are the type of teacher who doesn't want to try new things, then I really question why that is” (I, Tanya).

To add on, Logan shared a similar opinion. “Times are changing, and there's new, you know, programs out there and new theories and philosophies and things that are helping, you know, change the way we teach and, and stuff like that. So, I think just like keeping up with that is really important” (I, Logan). Logan went on to share her curiosity about such programs, theories and philosophies as well as her exploration of them. Yet, Logan was not the only one to voice a curiosity in the newness of things.

When Beth discussed her prior experiences that ultimately led her to Charlie Charming School, she voiced the excitement that came to her when starting a new program at a school she taught at prior to Charlie Charming School. Beth went on to share her enthusiasm for working with a population she had never experienced while having an opportunity to develop a new program she was eager to create. Beth continued to say that this excitement and enthusiasm stemmed from her curiosity for the newness of it all. In fact, Beth called this newness a “pill” for her curiosity (I, Beth).

As a final example to demonstrate how the love of learning, or, more specifically, curiosity is a driving factor in one’s responsibility to enhance their professional practice, it is
relevant to turn to Brittany’s interview. When directly asked, “How do you view your responsibility to enhance your own professional practice?” Brittany spoke about what she took away from a book she once read. The book taught her to be curious in truly trying to understand her students. For example, Brittany emphasized the need to put one’s self in other people’s shoes and see the world through their point of view. To this point, Brittany said, “So, I always try to see things through my students’ eyes, and you never really know where a student is coming from. So, it’s very important to always have that understanding. A student that you think is really put together might not be and sometimes vice versa” (I, Brittany).

**A commitment towards growth.** Most teachers (80%) revealed a positive disposition towards growth in both themselves and their students and claimed that such growth made them amenable to better themselves through professional development. This disposition supported teachers’ willingness to participate in professional development experiences.

**Personal growth.** It became evident that participants value the growth of not only their student population, but also of themselves as professionals. “Teaching for me is all about, not only what I can bring to the group as what I can take away from the group. So, I'm always looking. I tell my students all the time, [that] I get just as much from our experiences as they do” (I, Beth).

The emotions felt from the participants regarding their pursuit of personal growth shined through during interviews. Firstly, Paul shared, “It's not just a job. It's just what you do, you know, and if that's what you do, then you're always trying to get better at it” (I, Paul). As an example of what Paul is speaking to here, he shared the work he was doing to pilot a new initiative focused on grading. With this work, Paul has also experienced frustration. Paul went on to say that because the initiative is “so new, I don’t have all the pieces in place yet to be
effective” (I, Paul). In closing that conversation, regardless of his frustration, Paul was adamant about not giving up on his pursuit. “I don’t want to give up on it,” Paul said (I, Paul). Such commitment to master new skills contributed considerably to Paul growing as a teacher.

Richard expressed similar emotion during his interview, too. “I want to keep being pushed. You can't take a step forward unless you're courageous enough to admit that you have faults and that's something to teach us. I need to go seek out things to make myself better” (I, Richard). Even with more than 20 years of experience, Richard expressed the value of personal growth. Likewise, Henry stated, “I'm always looking for ways to improve things, including myself.” (I, Henry). Like Richard, Henry has more than 20 years of teaching experience and still exhibited a yearning for personal development. Brittany offered, “I would hope that anybody, no matter what line of work they’re in that they're striving to be better. And I think that my best version, I will never reach fully. But I think that striving to be better is always a good goal, and I believe that in every realm of our life” (I, Brittany).

This inherent interest in personal growth was observed across learning group meeting time as well. On multiple occasions, members of learning groups were observed saying things like, “The piece I’m struggling with…” (O1, Learning Group One) or “What I struggle with is…” (O2, Learning Group Two). As groups met, participants openly acknowledged struggles and sought out ways in which they could improve themselves through the feedback from their peers. Tanya, when talking about professional development, focused on her desire to refine and improve. “It’s like this idea of like, being vulnerable, and not ever thinking you’re like, the best teacher” (I, Tanya).

**Student growth.** It became clear that participants value the growth their students experience in the classroom as well. For example, during an interview with Logan, it was
apparent that the growth of her students has been a motivator for her to enhance her professional practice. To model this, Logan talked about the days of reflection that have taken place at Charlie Charming School. Logan shared that three to four days each school year are devoted to reflection—both students and teachers alike are given the opportunity to reflect upon their Charlie Charming School experiences. Those days, or sometimes just portions of days, are mostly led by teachers, but sometimes led by upper classmen. Discussions take place and personal goals are considered. Logan shared that times like these give her the chance to be more conscious of reflecting on herself as a teacher. To this point, Logan said, “You know, how I can be a better teacher for my students. Like if something is successful for them, like maintaining that” (I, Logan). Logan went on to mention that she also aims to make changes when her students voice concern. For instance, Logan discussed trying to “switch gears” to find a way to reach students (I, Logan).

Furthermore, Richard spoke to the point that students are at the heart of an educator’s professional practice. “The students run everything. They need to own the experience. It's about what they want to be as a person” (I, Richard). Those words were just the start of Richard sharing his energy and excitement for experiencing student growth. Richard said, “And I have the opportunity all the time working here to help kids move forward with what they want and feel fully charged with” (I, Richard). To Richard, student growth signifies a movement forward both socially and academically. Similarly, when considering her responsibility to enhance her professional practice, Brittany discussed her philosophy of education and her goal about growing her students into the best possible people they can be. This involves helping them to, “be just really wonderful citizens and to just create an excitement for learning” (I, Brittany).
Lastly, an interesting contribution was made by Paul. During an interview, Paul shared an experience he had with a student. During class, Paul saw a student of his not working on the assigned task. Paul pulled the student aside to question why she was working on a task for another class. When the student explained that the other assignment was more pressing at the time, Paul understood her point and gave her the chance to take “an off day” from his class’s work. Although it was not something Paul regularly allowed students to do, Paul felt like giving the student this opportunity was best for the student to grow.

**Summary**

In summary, this dedication to growth in self and students coupled with a love of learning undergird teachers’ willingness to engage in professional development. Teachers are intrinsically motivated to better their professional practice.

**Research Question Two Results**

**Theme Two: Positive Participation**

The second research question was used to examine how teachers view their experience as participants within a collaborative learning group. There was strong evidence that this approach to professional development was viewed positively by all participants. These positive experiences can be explained by three categories- group ownership, structure, and perceived benefits. Participant responses in the sections that follow testify to the empowerment teachers experience through their participation in collaborative learning groups when all three categories are considered.

**Group ownership.** Observations and comments by teachers affirmed that participating in a collaborative learning group provided ownership in the problem-solving process. This
ownership was undergirded by two sub-categories; culture of trust and group composition. The details that follow help to describe how the researcher defines the category group ownership.

During the observed Wednesday morning collaborative learning group meetings, participants’ roles within the group and trust in one another was evident. Without prompting, Beth shared, “We take a full team approach, like, you know, all decisions are team decisions” (I, Beth). Beth elaborated by adding, “And that doesn’t mean that every person has to agree that, you know, the decision can’t be made until everyone is 100%. At least people have had that opportunity to share their, you know, their thinking and express with the best interest of the program” (I, Beth).

Similar sentiments were found in all three groups. For instance, during another group’s meeting, the focus was to assure the group’s understanding of Charlie Charming School’s newly adapted 2019-2020 Course of Study. Going into that meeting, participants were made aware that the course of study for the following school year had been nearly finalized. Therefore, that collaborative group meeting time was designed to ensure that all department members were on the same page regarding department goals, philosophy, and new courses. During that discussion, all members of this group ($n = 9$) participated in the conversation with relevant contributions and meaningful questions. For example, one person posed a clarifying question in which three others shared their experiences in response while the other silent group members jotted down notes, maintained eye contact with the speaker, and/or nodded their head to demonstrate agreement.

**Culture of trust.** In order to have these conversations, it was imperative that they occurred within a culture of trust, as seen by the participator’s willingness to share during collaborative learning group time. Richard best summarizes this trust when he explained, “Constructive feedback is only heard in that culture of trust” (I, Richard). This was exemplified
during the second observation with Learning Group Three. When a teacher was facing a situation, she did not quite feel comfortable with, she asked, “Can I read this email to you guys?” (O2, Learning Group Three). After the email was read and the conversation progressed, it was obvious that this learning group had undergone similar scenarios like this in the past—where participants felt trust in one another to discuss situations they were facing. This point was further clarified by a participant’s response on the questionnaire stating that during collaborative learning group time, members come together and support each other.

This exhibit of care and concern was just one way that trust was observed. On multiple occasions throughout each of the six observed collaborative learning group meetings, jokes were made, and giggles were heard. This was not to say that participants were not taking their experience seriously, but instead, that participants felt comfortable enough to include a bit of sarcasm in discussions. “We are still trying to figure out what works best and we’re having fun” Beth proclaimed (O1, Learning Group Three). Even when small statements brought on laughs, time for progress was never sacrificed. “You’re so punny!” was said in response to a comment made during Learning Group Three’s first observation and progress continued without a skip of a beat (O1, Learning Group Three).

As a last example, it is relevant to turn to Lucas’ interview. As Lucas considered his participation in collaborative learning groups and the progress that goes underway, he always mentioned trust. The trust Lucas expressed was not only the trust participators have in one another, but also a trust in the process. “You have to live in it for a while to figure out how to use it. You can't turn the ship around in an hour kind of thing. So, the fact that I think that we all have that trust is important” (I, Lucas).
**Group composition.** When aiming to understand how teachers view their participation in collaborative learning groups, it was quickly revealed that the participants had differing opinions regarding the best way to comprise group membership for optimal success. As first described in Chapter Three, when first implemented, collaborative learning groups were diversified in their design; each inclusive of first-year or beginning teachers to veteran teachers across grades K-12, who may not have had any common students between them. At the time of this research, learning groups were organized by department.

During their interviews, Henry and Paul described their memories of the diversified collaborative groupings. “Perhaps one of the most fun groups I was in was actually not a departmental group—it was a cross area group of five or six teachers. We were sharing with each other what were, you know, our challenges and our successes in our classrooms. And, you know, even though one may be an art teacher, and another a physics teacher, we still had a lot to learn from each other. And so, I found that kind of thing very helpful (I, Henry). On the contrary, Paul felt otherwise. “Because we were never really allowed to have a solid back and forth until maybe the last two minutes of the time, it really didn't get me very far. And because nobody knew my subject it really didn’t get me anywhere” (I, Paul). Lucas had a similar reaction as Paul. During his interview, Lucas expressed the growth he experienced from the shift to the department-based model. Lucas divulged, “I think that the department-based model is very practical. And I think that practicality is important, for uses of time that are limited, so there's an efficiency in a continuity there” (I, Lucas).

To consider a participant’s perspective on both group compositions, it is helpful to turn to a questionnaire response, “When learning groups work well, I find that I get new ideas from them, and I am more aware of the work my colleagues were doing, which helps planning and
communication. My best experience was our learning group last year. The group was a good size and diverse between subject matter. This year's work has been much more focused and concrete. It has certainly had its own conceptual and practical challenges, but I have enjoyed the experience, and have gained a lot from my colleagues and their work and ideas through this year” (Q).

Tanya shared her views on the two kinds of groupings, too. “I'm the kind of person who would be happy to find time in my workday to have that meeting about the nuts and bolts sorts of things. Because I think learning groups is special, and we shouldn't take that time away. But then other people are like, it's just like, fluffy and stupid, and want the time for the nuts and bolts. So, it's like, two different perspectives. And I think there's valid value in both” (I, Tanya).

Tanya elaborated on her mentioning of “nuts and bolts” to mean things like policies, procedures, and curriculum that teachers need to devote attention to collectively as a department, such as end-of-quarter grading policies, exam preparation procedures, and curricular revisions. Tanya saw these topics to be less about the individual teacher growing in comparison to the discussions that focused on what she referred to as “fluffy”. In explaining what she meant by “fluffy”, Tanya talked about a learning group meeting that took place after a lower school art teacher observed her upper school math class. After the observation, Tanya and the observing teacher brought student work to the meeting and went through the “Looking at Student Thinking (LAST) Protocol” as a collaborative learning group. While Tanya believed some people could see it as “ridiculous” for such differing levels of teachers and content backgrounds to be discussing her upper school math class, Tanya found the conversation of the collaborative learning group meeting to be a very valuable one for her. Even when Tanya was not in the role of the observer or the observed, she felt similar sentiment.
Ultimately, results indicate that there is an importance to be seen in both types of group compositions. One points to the practicality and direct take-away from a department-based composition while the other points to a richness in abstract discussion and diverse perspectives from a diversified group composition.

**Structure.** The protocol or structure of the collaborative groups also enhanced the experience. Here, structure refers both to the regularly scheduled meetings as well as the sense of relevance provided by clear expectations and a purposeful agenda. Meetings occurred on a weekly basis and were structured around a relevant agenda of items to be discussed. Observations, interviews, and questionnaire responses all revealed the importance participants attributed to having this predetermined structure to discuss timely issues.

**Weekly scheduling.** Results indicate that the scheduling of collaborative learning group meeting time, every Wednesday, from 8:00 to 9:00 a.m., building in a late student start time of 9:00 a.m., is beneficial to its success. Responses to specific items on the questionnaire capture the importance of regularly scheduled weekly meetings. Most simply stated, one respondent typed, “I love the time allotted to PD on Wednesday mornings!” (Q). This love for the time did not go unnoticed across all three learning group meetings, either. Relevant conversations among group members were always flowing from start to end of meeting time. Not to mention, these discussions of substance were observed to be fluid, organic and free of interruptions. To this point, another participant documented, “Our Wednesday morning PD time has really worked!” (Q). This was evidenced during observations as there was no need for hand-raising and no distractions from technology at any of the six one-hour observations. Weekly time was observed as meaningful and useful.
In summary, another participant stated, “I like getting the opportunity to weekly check in with colleagues, hear what is going on in their classrooms, and gain feedback” (Q). One final contribution included, “It has been good to have weekly opportunities to meet up with other teachers and share what is going on in our respective subjects” (Q). These two culminating responses were only further illuminated through interviews, as participants shared that in order to discuss current and timely items with real substance, meetings needed to be held weekly. For example, during her interview, Laura weighed in on the view of participation in collaborative learning groups.

Laura began by voicing what she believed to be a popular opinion among professionals, that being meetings at work are typically looked at unfavorably. Laura continued by predicting that an outsider might consider the thought of attending a weekly collaborative learning group meeting as onerous, but it’s when the work that takes place within the structure of the weekly meeting is purposeful and moving people forward that the routine meeting is necessary and can be experienced as meaningful. Laura affirmed that, “Like, no one wants to go to a meeting. But I feel like these meetings are really good,” (I, Laura).

**Clear expectations.** Participants discussed that clear expectations for following through on action items ensure success at collaborative learning group meetings. Lucas communicated, “I think that you need to have benchmarks and timelines and expectations” (I, Lucas). To add to this point, Richard professed, “When you have expectations, and no follow through, you create cynicism” (I, Richard). Both Lucas and Richard, of Learning Group One, expressed their appreciation for the sharing of an agenda via email prior to collaborative group meetings and the follow through that they’ve experienced. This dedication to accomplishing as much of the
expectations on the agenda as meaningfully possible was observed during all observations as well.

During follow-up procedures, the researcher came to find that the administration at Charlie Charming School would sometimes have housekeeping items that they might ask the facilitators to address during their collaborative group meetings, but how the time would be used outside of that would be left up to the discretion of the group as a whole to decide. To demonstrate this in action, in an email sent by the facilitator of Learning Group One, not only was the week’s agenda for Learning Group One shared, but also a closing sentence that asked the group to, “Please add any topics you would like to discuss to this shared agenda/notes document”.

All sources of data led to the researcher’s discovery that the use of such a purposeful agenda at collaborative learning group meetings not only outlines expectations clearly, but also kept progress moving forward. Agendas were observed to serve as a guide to keep collaborative learning group meetings running smoothly and on task for goals of the present time. For example, at an observation of Learning Group Three, participators spent a portion of their time discussing appropriate interview questions. This was put forth as an agenda item after Beth, group co-facilitator, sat with a team to interview a candidate. Beth shared that she walked away from that interview knowing she wanted to draft some new questions with her collaborative learning group. Beth stated, “There are times when I'm very intentional. So, that means that what you saw the other day came out of an observation I made. I had the opportunity to sit with a team as they were interviewing a candidate and walked away with, ‘Okay, so how can we work together to design questions that are going to actually get to the information that we want to get to?’ So, it was very intentional to have that particular conversation” (I, Beth). The expectations
of this meeting were made clear. The collaborative learning group was given a task to complete through the creation of Beth’s agenda item and their undivided attention was brought to that timely and needed task. By the meeting’s end, the group had generated a list of questions for their potential new hires, as well as removed a number of previously drafted questions, to accomplish their goal within that meeting’s time.

Logan’s interview also targeted how the weekly expectations proved both necessary and meaningful for her. “Each week, we have different agenda items. So, the one that you saw, there was a lot going on, because the end of the year is crazy. So, I think what we did (not that I ever feel like it's not a good use of time) really benefited me because we went through our calendar and were able to put down specific dates of things that were coming up” (I, Logan). To echo this, Lucas shared that his current group’s weekly meetings have been, “much less philosophically exciting, but also hyper necessary” (I, Lucas). Collaborative learning group members are able to target these time-sensitive and relevant issues when expectations are clear.

To better understand the diversity of topics as well as the type of curricular issues discussed under these clear expectations, it is helpful to present other examples of agenda items. During one observation of Learning Group Two, the researcher witnessed three agenda items explored over their hour together. First, the five participants discussed the possible introduction of a trimester course for the following academic year. The conversation blossomed into the consideration of a cross-disciplinary trimester course, for example, a cross between their core content and culinary or theater. Before moving into the next item on the agenda, one participant shared an experience he previously had with offering mini-lessons, as it related to the idea of cross-disciplinary work. Then, the facilitator transitioned the group to the second topic, that being the consideration for a senior-only course. The group discussed how to ensure that the
senior-only course would be new learning for all twelfth graders enrolled, but also at a level of which all students within the course could strive to reach. The third agenda item focused on progress reporting. The highlight of this part of the meeting was the three participants sharing what they were doing to access progress of students. Other results shared throughout this chapter allude to other agenda items covered across other groups as well.

**Perceived benefits.** The participants voiced that the collaborative learning groups have not only helped them become better at their teaching craft, but also allowed them to better engage in and appreciate skills like active listening, purposeful dialogue, sharing of perspectives, and reflection. Additionally, participating in the process of learning groups was described as a means for teachers to engage in more collaborative discussions about educational issues and share perspectives. These benefits also came as opportunities for a variety of personal growth experiences in teachers. Table 7 documents questionnaire responses \((n = 14)\) gathered to validate the perceived benefits participants experienced through their collaborative learning group participation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Impact on Teaching</th>
<th>Personal Growth</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“It’s given me a chance to share ideas and get feedback” (Q, Richard)</td>
<td>“It has aided me in lesson planning, examining different practices and techniques in the classroom, and given me the opportunity to learn from other expert teachers” (Q, Tanya).</td>
<td>“I have better insight into what I know I'm capable of as a teacher, and how I can leverage that to get more out of my students” (Q, Lucas).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It has also given me a platform to share my experiences and professional training” (Q, Paul).</td>
<td>“Talking about how other math teachers approach a mathematical topic is also helpful and can also influence how I present similar material in my class” (Q, Brittany).</td>
<td>“Diverse perspectives push my thinking and provide me insight into others' minds and ideas” (Q, Beth).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Made my work with coworkers more collaborative” (Q, Logan).</td>
<td>“Having different teachers give advice or simply explain how they encourage their students to think in their classrooms has shaped my own teaching” (Q, Richard).</td>
<td>“These groups have helped me grow numerous ways as an educator, a coworker, and as a learner” (Q, Richard).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“They allow me to share experiences with coworkers, build working relationships, gain perspective through others’ insights, and reflect on my own progress towards my goals” (Q, Donna).</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Hearing ideas or strategies that others have put into practice not only allows me to get a better understanding of how a lesson might have panned out, but it also energizes me and pushes my creativity” (Q, Donna). “Many connections to one's own teaching as different colleagues shared their experiences” (Q, Peter).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I do appreciate opportunities to have collaborative discussions about educational issues” (Q, Paul).</td>
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Overall, participants agreed that they experienced a positive impact on their teaching and their personal growth through the collaborative learning group process. For instance, they spoke of building better relationships with their colleagues, gathering interesting feedback, getting ideas for improved lesson plans and helpful suggestions for reaching students, as well as the push to move their thinking forward, among other benefits documented in Table 7.

Summary

In summary, enhancing one’s professional practice through participation in collaborative learning groups is possible when there is a sense of group ownership, with attention given to the group’s structure, and a dedication to perceived benefits of teachers. Teachers will experience positive participation in collaborative learning groups when these possibilities become a reality.

Research Question Three Results

Theme Three: Cognitive Processes

When aiming to identify what factors lead to a teacher’s own professional growth, this study showed that teachers appear to thrive in an environment that requires them to engage meaningfully in critical and creative thinking. Unlike most professional experiences reported by the group, the process of participation in collaborative learning groups is not a passive experience. Rather, teachers partake in stimulating discussions about relevant issues and timely matters that they are facing.

Factors. Progress occurs and decisions are reached using three important cognitive processes-active listening, purposeful dialogue, and teacher reflection. Participant confirmations in the sections that follow affirm that professional development experiences that encompass a combination of these three factors are what allow teachers to grow professionally.
**Active listening.** When discussing the process of collaboration in a learning group, six participants referred to active listening as critical to the success of the meeting. Most simply and to the point, Brittany stated “I love sitting back and listening to peoples’ ideas” (7 March 2019). Brittany went on to share how grateful she was to have the opportunity to “just listen”-especially after being out of the teacher role for the previous few years while raising her children.

Additionally, Richard proclaimed, “You know, all great teachers are great listeners. And I really focus on that and try to be in the moment” (21 February 2019). Richard added that he also tries to model this quality in his classroom, for his students to learn from and emulate as well.

During their interviews, Logan, Henry and Beth all communicated that active listening was a big part of their personal participation in collaborative learning groups. For instance, Logan declared, “It’s good for me to just sit, listen, absorb, take back information and then apply it to my classroom, even though it doesn't necessarily pertain to what I'm doing, in a way” (18 April 2019). Along these same lines, Henry said, “When it's how to help myself mostly, it’s when I'm listening and hearing what they have to say, maybe with a few probing questions” (28 March 2019). In conjunction with this, Beth described her experience in collaborative learning groups to include the opportunity to hear perspectives from other people when she may not normally be able to hear those perspectives.

This professional skill was evident during observations of collaborative learning groups as well. For example, during the first of the six observations, a participant was heard starting a conversation saying, “As Paul just said . . .” (6 February 2019). Opening lines like these were documented all throughout the remaining five observations.

Additionally, as stated earlier, there were no distractions from technology at any of the six one-hour observations showing evidence of participants’ undivided attention. The eye
contact listeners showed to those who were speaking as well as the head nods of agreement they afforded provided additional evidence of the active listening that took place during collaborative learning group time. To this point, it is safe to say that others would agree with Lucas who said, “Hearing about people's teaching and learning, I think, is really important to listen and see examples of how other people approach teaching” (17 April 2019).

**Purposeful dialogue.** Purposeful dialogue among collaborative learning group members was also observed during all six observations. In this context, dialogue can be described as a mode of exchange among people in which there is a true turning to one another, and a full appreciation of one another as genuine beings (Senge, 2014). For example, during an observation with Learning Group Two, Tanya begins a conversation with, “The thing that I struggle with…” to which Henry makes a suggestion and Tanya then exclaims, “Oh, I like that!” (2 February 2019). Following that bit of dialogue, the day’s note keeper was observed jotting notes on their Google Doc regarding the dialogue that took place. During another observation, with Learning Group Three, a new teacher proposed a question in which four teachers responded in the form of dialoging. During the observation with Learning Group One that focused on the following year’s course of study, a participant was heard saying, “This is so hard!” after the dialogue regarding how to genuinely differentiate the leveling of courses across their department progressed for approximately 30 minutes. To this comment, another participant responded, “But this is such an interesting conversation!” These three example dialogues, one from each learning group, were observed to be fluid, dynamic, and non-judgmental.

When discussing how participants view their engagement in collaborative learning groups, five participants referred to engaging in dialogue as a noteworthy component to their participation in collaborative learning groups. An interesting contribution was made by Laura in
regard to participation through dialogue. When mentioning the fact that some participants tended to engage in dialogue more than others, Laura shared, “My dad was always a quiet guy. But like the smartest person I know. So, sometimes I find that quiet people, when they say something, it actually matters” (28 February 2019).

Also, a memorable share stemmed from Henry’s interview. “When I'm most actively speaking, I'm trying to share something with other people. It isn't helping me, but I'm hoping it helps them” (28 February 2019). Henry shared that what he voices during meetings is meant to provide messages, ideas, and advice for his peers. This suggests that teachers participate in purposeful dialogue because they intend to offer perspectives for their peers’ benefit.

Words spoken by Paul during his interview are also worth sharing. “My first year it was fine. But a lot of it was extremely rigid in terms of following protocols. And, so, it was just unfortunate that we couldn't really engage in the kind of conversations that really get me anywhere, when, like, I can argue, and I can be a little bit more provocative in the things I throw out there” (14 March 2019). This comment made by Paul points to the idea that when purposeful dialogue is missing members feel dissatisfied or disconnected.

**Reflection.** Engaging in reflection is another professional skill that was important to the process. Reflection can take on different forms for different people. While reflection may also be something one doesn’t expect to observe, it was observed across each of the collaborative learning groups. For example, at the close of the very first observation, a participant was heard saying, “Rich discussion, really fun, just as powerful as last time” (Learning Group One, 6 February 2019). This quote provides evidence that participants have been reflecting upon their weekly experiences in collaborative learning groups. At the close of an observation with Learning Group Two, a participant was heard communicating, “What we might want to think
about for next time….” (20 February 2019). This quote provides evidence that participants are leaving collaborative learning group time with a better appreciation and ability to gain from the group process and to reflect on what can be brought to the meeting in the future. As a last example, during an observation with Learning Group Three, Beth was heard encouraging her learning group members to be reflective when she said to the group, “Think about what this might look like for you,” (10 April 2019).

Not only was the appreciation for reflection apparent through observations and questionnaire responses, it was also mentioned during interviews. Most explicitly, Sarah shared, “I have to make it my own. So, it's very informal reflecting for myself. And, I think that that's most authentic” (28 February 2019). Brittany also demonstrates a better appreciation for reflection thanks to her experience in collaborative learning groups. “There are so many great opportunities and great ideas that come out of those meetings that I didn't even know I needed, but just hearing what someone else is doing in their classroom might trigger me to think, ‘I can do something like that.’ Or, ‘Hey, that's a great idea!’ Or, ‘What if I change what I'm doing?’” (Brittany, 7 March 2019). Here, Brittany exhibits how she can better her craft.

Summary

Throughout the study, participants spoke meaningfully concerning how they’ve grown because of their participation in collaborative learning group meetings. Their experiences encompassed active listening, purposeful dialogue, and reflection. Teachers will bloom in an environment that provides professional growth experiences composed of these three factors.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the participants’ perspectives of teacher collaboration, inclusive of dialogue and reflection, and the influence it
has on enhancing one’s professional practice in a K-12 learning environment. Specifically, this study focused on exploring the practice of teachers from Charlie Charming School who regularly engage in collaborative learning groups. To understand the impact this process had on teacher development, the researcher sought answers to three research questions. Online questionnaires, non-participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and follow-up procedures were used for triangulation among data collection methods. Then, codes were created from keywords and phrases of the data sources to form categories that led to themes in response to each research question. In total, three themes emerged leading to two assertions.

The first research question explored how teachers view their responsibility to enhance their own professional practice. Participants’ stories illuminated that a dedication to growth in self and students coupled with a teacher’s love of learning undergird teachers’ willingness to engage in professional development.

The second research question examined how teachers view their participation in collaborative learning groups. Participants’ contributions supported the notion that enhancing one’s professional practice through participation in collaborative learning groups is possible when there is a sense of group ownership, with attention given to the group’s structure, and a dedication to the perceived benefits of teachers.

Using the third and final research question, the researcher sought to discover what factors lead to a teacher’s own professional growth. Discussions with participants suggest that teachers will bloom in an environment that provides professional growth experiences composed of active listening, purposeful dialogue, and reflection.

Ultimately, participants spoke meaningfully to how they’ve grown because of their participation in collaborative learning group meetings. These professional development
experiences were not seen passive, but instead opportunities for creative thinking and critical problem solving. To that end, this study suggests that all professional growth experiences should be an opportunity for teachers to experience active listening, purposeful dialogue, and reflection. Therefore, to see growth in teachers, educational environments should provide collaborative growth experiences composed of such factors.

To conclude, teachers motivated by their own love of learning and desire to grow enter a professional setting where they take ownership of their growth process through predictable schedules outlined with clear expectations. They perceive their collaborative learning group time as beneficial and as a positive professional development experience brought about because they have opportunities to listen, dialogue and reflect.

Chapter Five introduces a figure encompassing these researcher results and how the research in the field of professional development supports the theoretical foundation of the factors of a successful collaborative professional learning model. Implications for education along with recommendations for future research will also be addressed in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents the summary and conclusions gathered through this research study. First, this chapter documents an overview of the research process. The next section provides a discussion of results organized by research question. Additionally, implications to the field of professional learning are outlined with recommendations made for further inquiry. At the chapter’s end, trustworthiness is addressed. The chapter concludes with a final summary.

Overview of the Research Process

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the participants’ perspectives of teacher collaboration, inclusive of dialogue and reflection, and the influence it has on enhancing one’s professional practice in a K-12 learning environment. Specifically, this study focused on exploring the practice of teachers who regularly engage in collaborative learning groups. To understand the impact this process had on teacher development, phenomenological research methods were used. The researcher sought answers to the following questions:

1. How do teachers view their responsibility to enhance their own professional practice?
2. How do teachers view their participation in collaborative learning groups?
3. What factors lead to a teacher’s own professional growth?

A purposive convenience sample was selected from the 56 teachers who participated in collaborative learning groups at Charlie Charming School during the 2018-2019 school year. The results of this study were based on the analysis of information gleaned from four data sources, including an online questionnaire, non-participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and follow-up procedures. Researcher-designed online questionnaires were received from 25 Charlie Charming School’s teachers. Of those 25 teachers, 10 participants were chosen
for observations and interviews based on their willingness to be interviewed and representation of three complete professional learning groups.

Data analysis for this phenomenological research study was organized by research question. For each question data from all sources were coded. Next, codes were examined in terms of their frequencies, redundancies, and relevance to the question at hand. After streamlining those codes, the codes were grouped conceptually into categories. From six categories, three themes emerged. An analysis of the data resulted in the following three themes:

1. Intrinsic Motivation
2. Positive Participation
3. Cognitive Processes

From those three emergent themes, came two final assertions. First, teachers motivated by their own love of learning and desire to grow enter a professional setting where they can take ownership of their growth process through predictable schedules outlined with clear expectations. Second, all professional growth experiences should be an opportunity for teachers to experience active listening, purposeful dialogue, and reflection.

Although the researcher addressed each research question separately, results can function together (Saldaña, 2009). Figure 9 illustrates the coming together of researcher results and encompasses the emergent themes. The figure demonstrates the factors that made the collaborative learning groups at Charlie Charming School successful for study participants.
The discussion to follow elaborates on Figure 9 and how this research supports its foundation. The related research and theoretical framework pertaining to the current study’s results will be shared as well.

**Discussion of Results**

The factors of a successful collaborative professional learning model are comprised of the themes evolving from the results of the three research questions. Indeed, the first question pointed to intrinsic motivation and what drives teachers to engage in their own professional growth. The second research question focused on the factors of a collaborative experience that
allowed for positive participation. Finally, the third research question identified the cognitive processes contributing most to teacher growth. To share the results of the research questions, the following section has been divided into the three separate themes that emerged from the data.

**Research Question One**

1. How do teachers view their responsibility to enhance their own professional practice?

**Theme One: Intrinsic Motivation**

The first theme suggests that professional growth occurs when teachers are intrinsically motivated to learn thus see participation in learning as an opportunity. The teachers’ passion, curiosity, desire to learn, and better their practice were referenced as fierce motivators, as they spoke meaningfully about each becoming the best teacher they can be for both themselves and their students. There is much written on the role of intrinsic motivation at the foundation of professional development, a finding powerfully supported in literature (Cuesta, Azcárate, & Cardeñoso, 2016; Mansour, EL-Deghaidy, Alshamrani, & Aldahmash, 2014; Tooley & White, 2018).

For instance, Cuesta, Azcárate, and Cardeñoso (2016) stated that two factors leading to the greatest advancements in teacher development include a teachers’ recognition of their own needs, and the teachers’ positive attitude towards dealing with those needs. In their research conducted to understand the professional development process in education, these authors determined that how an individual undergoes processes of change are generally non-linear. This suggests that it is an internal motivator that fuels teachers to better their practice. This was evidenced in the present study when participants, like Paul, expressed how adamant they were about not giving up on new pursuits, regardless of the frustrations they faced.
Not all teachers will follow the same direct path towards growth, and they should not have to. Even with more than 20 years of experience, participants, like Richard, expressed the value of personal growth. Cuesta et al. (2016) go on to say that these growth processes of teachers are “personal and as diverse as the individuals” (p. 148). This demonstrates the need for educational stakeholders to turn to those intrinsic motivators leading to professional growth in their educators.

Taking teachers’ needs and wishes into account and considering what motivates teacher engagement does not typically occur in the planning and preparation of professional development experiences (Mansour, EL-Deghaidy, Alshamrani, & Aldahmash, 2014). When this does not occur, professional development activities are unlikely to yield significant improvements in teacher practice and, in turn, student achievement, until the priority of those activities is shifted to motivators expressed by teachers (Tooley & White 2018). All teachers should be able to come into professional learning experiences feeling excited to learn and ready to advance, as they did in the present study. During interviews, participants expressed enthusiasm as they voiced the excitement that stems from their curiosity in the newness of various facets of teaching and learning.

For all teachers to yield similar experiences, teachers deserve to feel like their learning needs are being addressed. This study coupled with the research that comes before it suggests that when teachers have the chance to tap into what they are motivated to learn and given the opportunity to work towards what is necessary for growth in themselves and their students, teachers will take responsibility of their own professional growth.
Implications for education and recommendations for future research. Researcher results in combination with related literature provide guidance to those stakeholders who desire to engage their teachers in effective professional growth experiences. Implications to the field of professional learning are written with recommendations made for further inquiry in reference to the first theme, intrinsic motivation. Table 8 summarizes the relationship between the theme, implications for education, and recommendations for future research.

Table 8
*Theme One: Implications and Recommendations for Future Research*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Implications for Education</th>
<th>Recommended Questions for Future Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme One: Teachers appear to be intrinsically motivated to improve and understand teaching and learning. Their motivation stems from a passion for teaching and an ongoing curiosity for learning as well as positive dispositions towards growth in one’s self and one’s students.</td>
<td>If educational stakeholders identify the needs of their teachers before involving them in professional development, then an authentic growth experience for teachers may be obtained.</td>
<td>How do public school teachers view their responsibility to enhance their own professional practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If educational stakeholders instill a growth mindset in adult learners, then teachers are likely to take on challenges and advance from those challenges; allowing them to increase their overall abilities and experience achievement.</td>
<td>How do teachers of a growth mindset view their responsibility to enhance their professional practice?</td>
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Results of this study indicated that teachers appeared to be intrinsically motivated to improve their trade. This intrinsic motivation was explained by teachers’ professed love of teaching and learning and their commitment towards growth. Therefore, educational
stakeholders might identify the needs of their teachers before involving them in professional development. An authentic experience for teachers will be obtained when those needs are considered and addressed. School personnel need to gather an understanding of their staff and what would lead them to be passionate in their pursuit of professional learning. Administrators should start their planning for professional development with the teachers themselves. To accomplish this, at the start of a school year, teachers could be provided with a survey requesting information about what professional development they are requesting for the year ahead. Alternatively, at the culmination of a school year, teachers could be provided with a survey requesting what professional development they would prefer for the following year. Ultimately, it might be beneficial for administrators to send out a needs assessment to staff to understand what new learning teachers deem necessary to supplement their growth. Districts need to come to realize the source of a teacher’s motivation.

In coming to understand that teachers appear to be intrinsically motivated to improve their trade, this study maintained a purposive convenience sample, where the careful attention was given to represent diversity among the sample. Participants’ years of experience ranged from 3-5 years all the way to more than 20 years. Participants worked with students across grade levels ranging from kindergarten to twelfth grade. 40% of participants identified as male and the other 60% identified as female. While this accounted for a wide range of diversity within Charlie Charming School, future research might consider sampling teachers from a public school district. Teacher voices from a public school would yield additional data to best understand teachers’ intrinsic motivators and how those motivators impact their responsibility to enhance their own professional practice.
Any and all educators entering their teaching careers should be supported in their growth process. Based on the stories shared by participants, teachers benefit from fostering a belief in themselves, their potential growth and the growth of their students. Participant voices throughout this research study suggest the importance of maintaining a growth mindset as an adult learner. Therefore, future researchers might consider exploring the growth mindset in adult professionals as they aim to enhance their practice. The work of Carol Dweck (2006) emphasizes that when students maintain a growth mindset, they are willing to take on challenges and advance from those challenges; allowing them to increase their overall abilities and experience achievement. While the published work of Carol Dweck (2006) has set the stage for many case studies and implications for educators to help advance their students, future research linking a growth mindset to adult learners could provide valuable data for adults and their potential for growth. Because the growth mindset is linked to the belief that one can grow, potential future research in this area could guide teachers towards embracing growth in themselves.

**Research Question Two**

2. How do teachers view their participation in collaborative learning groups?

**Theme Two: Positive Participation**

Once properly motivated, teachers feel their participation is either enhanced or diminished by the nature of the experience itself. As shown in the results for the second research question these teachers felt very positive about participation in collaborative learning groups. Having a safe environment in which they could share ideas within a predictable structure leading to perceived benefits accounted for their positive participation. Furthermore, when teachers were given time set aside to discuss issues and solve problems, they addressed what was important,
relevant and necessary to them, their students, and their school at the present moment. Recent research also provides evidence that collaborative learning experiences can help enhance teacher growth and improve teacher practice (Fullan, 2001; Nelson, Slavit, Perkins, & Hathorn, 2008; Wilson & Berne, 1999; Tooley & White, 2018).

Fullan (2001) stressed the importance of collaboration as a means of supporting adult learning. In his book, Leading in a Culture of Change, Fullan (2001) stated, “…the organization must frame the giving and receiving of knowledge as a responsibility and must reinforce such sharing” through a collaborative culture (p. 86). In the current study, participants spoke to taking on a full team approach when discussing issues. Moreover, teachers were observed participating in these types of conversations with the sharing of relevant contributions and meaningful questions.

Nelson, Slavit, Perkins, and Hathorn (2008) looked at the role structures played in supporting teachers in collaborative inquiry. Their research stated that these structures and processes included “an explicit reliance on collaborative norms and explicitly us[e] processes such as dialogue structured by protocols, distributing leadership responsibilities, and co-constructing an inquiry focus” (p. 1270). These results coincide with those of the current study, which indicated that the structure of Charlie Charming’s collaborative learning groups was deemed necessary to enhance their experience. Structure referred to both the regularly scheduled meetings as well as the sense of relevance provided by clear expectations and a purposeful agenda.

Wilson and Berne (1999), in their overall examination of professional development models, suggested that the most effective professional development opportunities require communities of learning where teachers take an active role, and trust as well as critique are
present among colleagues. Similarly, the participants voiced how the trusting environment of the collaborative learning groups gave them the opportunity to share their thinking without judgement. Richard best summarized this trust when he explained, “Constructive feedback is only heard in that culture of trust” (I, Richard).

Nevertheless, past research on professional development found that many teachers tend to feel as though they are simply participating in high-price compliance tasks (Tooley & White, 2018). It is unfortunate that, instead, teachers could be experiencing meaningful growth through collaborative professional learning. To that end, participants voiced that their time spent with collaborative learning groups has not only helped them become better at their teaching craft, but also allowed them to better engage in and appreciate skills like active listening, purposeful dialogue, sharing of perspectives, and reflection.

Implications for education and recommendations for future research. A summary of the relationship between the theme that emerged through results of research question two, an implication for education, and recommendations for future research is documented in Table 9.
Table 9

**Theme Two: Implication and Recommendations for Future Research**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Implication for Education</th>
<th>Recommended Questions for Future Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme Two: Participation in collaborative learning groups is viewed positively by teachers when there is a sense of group ownership, clear structure for the meetings, and perceived benefits to the teachers.</td>
<td>If collaborative learning groups are designed to consider the unique context of a school with consideration given to the time of week, time of day, group composition, and the local culture, then participation in collaborative learning groups will be viewed positively by teachers.</td>
<td>How do teacher views on participation in collaborative learning groups across schools of varying socio-economic standings add to current research? How does an added intervention of collaborative learning groups affect student achievement?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results of this study indicated that participation in collaborative learning groups is viewed positively by all participants. Not only did the teachers express an appreciation for having a voice, they also expressed gratitude for group ownership. Teachers communicated feeling safe discussing multiple perspectives. The structure afforded teachers a predictable schedule with protocols in place to guide progress and experience benefits to their profession.

Because participants agreed that they experienced growth through their collaborative learning group process, educational institutions should consider implementing their own version of collaborative learning groups for their teaching staff. However, in doing so, administrators should need to consider what exactly will allow their teachers to experience similar positive participation.

For example, schools should consider what time should be set aside for successful implementation of collaborative learning groups. Results revealed that the weekly-scheduled
meetings were deemed necessary to enhance the experience. Therefore, it is recommended that administrators schedule collaborative meeting time on a frequent basis, during a time slot that is free of interruptions. However, considering the time of week is also critical to its success. It is recommended that time be carved out of each week when teachers are at their prime and not distracted by other tasks. Like Charlie Charming School, teachers should meet in their collaborative groups at a time when students are not on the campus so teachers can remain fully engaged in their tasks. Administrators may benefit by including the teachers in their consideration of what time is most optimal for their school’s success.

Once the weekly time commitment has been made, a determining of clear expectations needs to be addressed. It may be in the interest of administrators to examine models of collaborative professional learning that allow teachers to address issues they find relevant using a protocol and agenda that works specifically for their school and their learning needs. It is recommended that a committee of voluntary teachers be included in the exploration of how common planning time is implemented in other schools. Schools could turn to other schools that are implementing collaborative learning group time to request the logistics of their implementation and even request time to observe the process or interview people involved.

Not to mention, when implementing a professional learning opportunity such as collaborative learning groups, it is relevant to consider that even the best development insights may fail to get translated effectively into action if there is an absence of trust. Therefore, it is suggested that administrators demonstrate trust in their teachers to implement the process. Most importantly, teachers should feel safe and respected as they participate. If administrators include their teachers in the construction of collaborative learning groups at their school, it will be more likely for teachers to feel included, safe and trusted.
Because data analysis revealed that the participants had differing opinions regarding the best way to comprise group membership for optimal success, it might be necessary to gather together educational stakeholders, including teachers themselves, to consider how collaborative learning groups would best be composed at a particular school. Results indicated that there is practicality and direct take-away from a department-based composition while there is also a richness in abstract discussion and diverse perspectives from a diversified group composition. Therefore, administrations might consider implementing a rotating schedule of two different group compositions: one department-based and one diversified across grade-level and subject area. That way, teachers can have the opportunity to experience the positive impacts gained from both group compositions.

In the end, it is suggested that collaborative learning groups be designed to consider the unique context of school with a consideration given to the time of week, time of day, group composition, and the local culture. Administrators may want to avoid the trap of designing any sort of development model from their own perspectives. Rather, their goal should be to understand and respect all experiences, capacities, feelings, and context of their teachers.

These implications were considered based upon the sample taken from Charlie Charming School. It would also be valuable to consider a larger sampling of teacher participants from schools that vary across socio-economic standing. Incorporating districts that cover a broad range will add to the literature, as it is likely that not all districts are afforded the same resources and personnel. To that end, results have the potential to differ across schools of varying socio-economic status. Therefore, a wider population of teacher participants can only enrich the understanding of how teachers are enhancing their professional practice through collaborative learning opportunities.
Lastly, additional research linking school’s implementation of collaborative learning groups to student achievement, such as test scores and student growth, may strengthen the argument for integration of collaborative learning groups across schools. More specifically, an intervention study documenting the impact of collaborative learning groups on student achievement may provide district leaders with greater reason to implement the researcher-crafted professional learning model in their districts.

**Research Question Three**

3. What factors lead to a teacher’s own professional growth?

**Theme Three: Cognitive Processes**

After teachers’ needs are considered and logistics are put in place, it is necessary to provide emphasis on the active involvement of teachers in their professional growth process. The final theme is the role cognitive processes play in promoting growth in understanding and practice. Participants in the current study most frequently identified active listening, purposeful dialogue, and reflection as the leading factors in their own professional growth. When aiming to identify these factors, the data revealed that teachers appear to thrive in an environment that requires them to engage meaningfully in critical and creative thinking. It was apparent that progress occurs, and decisions are reached using these three important cognitive processes. In short, significant growth cannot be experienced passively. The mind and body should be afforded stimulating experiences that energize one to engage. For that reason, the final theme, cognitive processes, was included in the suggested model of collaborative professional learning.

This research documents the growth teachers experienced by participating in collaborative learning groups due to the stimulating discussions about relevant issues and timely matters that they are facing. Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon (2001) also reported
that opportunities for active learning is one of the main features of teacher professional development that have had significant and positive effects on increases in knowledge, skills and changes in classroom practice. To that end, active learning is enhanced when teachers engage in critical thinking.

Charner-Laird, Kirkpatrick, Szczesiul, Watson, and Gordon (2016) found that teachers who genuinely engaged in critical dialogue experienced essential learning, support for success, and retention. Purposeful dialogue deserves to be ever-present in the process of growth, as observed in the current study. Participants referred to engaging in dialogue as a noteworthy component to their participation in collaborative learning groups. Participants voiced that their dialogue during meetings provides messages, ideas, and advice for peers to take back to their classrooms. Likewise, when purposeful dialogue was missing, members felt dissatisfied or disconnected. Teachers need not be isolated. Instead, they need to have conversations that give them the opportunity to grow beyond their current state.

Ingvarson, Meiers, and Beavis (2005) also conducted a study focusing on features of professional development experiences. They reported that the most important influence on impact on practice is the extent to which programs provide opportunities for active learning and reflection. Quotes taken from the field notes during observations and questionnaire data of the current study provide additional evidence that engaging in reflection allows for a better appreciation and ability to gain from their group process. For example, one questionnaire respondent shared that her participation in the collaborative learning group process has given her the chance to gain perspective through others’ insights and reflect on her own progress towards her goals.
Ingvarson et al. (2005) also reported that the coupling of content focus with active learning and opportunities to receive feedback strongly influenced teacher efficacy. Although participants did not emphasize content focus in this current study, participants did discuss the benefits they experienced when they received feedback during collaborative learning group time. An opportunity for like-minded peers to offer constructive feedback can prompt teachers to engage in both purposeful dialogue and reflective processes and in turn experience growth.

**Implications for education and recommendations for future research.** When addressing research question three, the theme titled Cognitive Processes emerged. Table 10 summarizes the relationship among the theme, an implication for education, and recommendations for future research.

Table 10

*Theme Three: Implication and Recommendations for Future Research*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Implication for Education</th>
<th>Recommended Questions for Future Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme Three: All professional growth experiences should be an opportunity for teachers to experience cognitive processes, like active listening, purposeful dialogue, and reflection.</td>
<td>If administrators implement professional growth experiences that allow for cognitive processes like active listening, purposeful dialogue, and reflection, then teachers are likely to engage meaningfully in their growth process.</td>
<td>How does teacher engagement in active listening impact a teacher’s professional growth?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How does teacher engagement in purposeful dialogue impact a teacher’s professional growth?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How does teacher engagement in reflection impact a teacher’s professional growth?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because participants in the current study most frequently identified active listening, purposeful dialogue, and reflection as the leading factors in their own professional growth,
educational stakeholders need to offer teachers the opportunity to cognitively engage in their learning. Active listening is a cognitive process that was mentioned often during data collection. Administrators can promote active listening by implementing professional growth experiences that enter teachers into smaller group environments, like collaborative learning groups, where teachers are in close proximity of one another and less likely to come across distractions. Equally as prevalent was the finding of importance of purposeful dialogue. Therefore, time built in by administrators for active listening can also provide opportunity for teachers to engage in purposeful dialogue. Administrators can provide the recommended small groups of teachers with common non-instructional time to encourage teachers to engage in these cognitive processes. An additional cognitive process labeled as important to professional process was reflection. The data gathered provides evidence that the time teachers devoted to reflection supported their professional growth. This research study suggests that teachers appreciate the perspectives of those they may not typically have had an opportunity to hear from, converse with, or reflect upon which ultimately led to the researcher’s model of collaborative professional learning.

The current study should not be the last to address these cognitive processes that are helping to lead to a teacher’s own professional growth. If district administrators want to see their teachers engaged in meaningful professional learning experiences, they need to rely on research of what it really means to ensure such experiences. Therefore, future studies should delve more deeply into the cognitive processes identified in the present study. Schools will benefit from a deeper understanding of how active listening, purposeful dialogue and reflection can help to engage teachers to participate meaningfully in improving their practice.
Discussion of Theoretical Framework with Respect to Themes

Knowles’ (1984) five assumptions of adult learning are ever-present in the current research study’s emergent themes. Table 11 illustrates Knowles’ assumptions as they relate to each theme.

Table 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Assumptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do teachers view their responsibility to enhance their own professional practice?</td>
<td>Theme One: Teachers appear to be intrinsically motivated to improve and understand teaching and learning. Their motivation stems from a passion for teaching and an ongoing curiosity for learning as well as positive dispositions towards growth in one’s self and one’s students.</td>
<td>1. Self-Concept of the Learner &lt;br&gt; 2. The Role of Experience &lt;br&gt; 3. Readiness to Learn &lt;br&gt; 4. Orientation to Learning &lt;br&gt; 5. Motivation to Learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do teachers view their participation in collaborative learning groups?</td>
<td>Theme Two: Participation in collaborative learning groups is viewed positively by teachers when there is a sense of group ownership, clear structure for the meetings, and perceived benefits to the teachers.</td>
<td>1. Self-Concept of the Learner &lt;br&gt; 2. The Role of Experience &lt;br&gt; 4. Orientation to Learning &lt;br&gt; 5. Motivation to Learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What factors lead to a teacher’s own professional growth?</td>
<td>Theme Three: All professional growth experiences should be an opportunity for teachers to experience cognitive processes, like active listening, purposeful dialogue, and reflection.</td>
<td>4. Orientation to Learning &lt;br&gt; 5. Motivation to Learn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Knowles’ first assumption, self-concept of the learner, shows the shift educators take towards an autonomy in their own learning. This assumption is most clearly validated in theme two, Positive Participation. For example, the researcher came to find that although the
administration at Charlie Charming School would sometimes have housekeeping items that they might ask facilitators to address during collaborative group meetings, the majority of time was left up to the discretion of the group as a whole to decide how to devote their learning group time. Agendas were always plentiful with group members’ requested topics.

Building upon his first assumption, Knowles’ second assumption is that the adult learners’ accumulation of experiences, or role of experience, will allow them to discover for themselves the gaps between where they are and where they wish to go (Knowles, 1970). Although it can be said that this second assumption was clearly visible in both the first and second themes, this assumption is most noticeably present in theme one, Intrinsic Motivation. As groups met, participants openly acknowledged struggles and sought out ways in which they could improve themselves through the feedback from their peers. A specific instance points to Beth who shared that teaching for her is greatly about what she can take away from her experiences. In another interview, Richard expressed similar sentiment when he voiced that he always seeks out things to make his practice better.

Knowles' third assumption, readiness to learn, is also most prevalent in the first theme. His third assumption states that, “as a person matures, his readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his social roles” (Smith, 2002, p. 3). Adult learners tend to be driven to stay current with the ever-changing social demands that surround them, just like teachers aim to stay current with innovations in education. To demonstrate this, Logan shared, “Times are changing, and there's new, you know, programs out there and new theories and philosophies and things that are helping, you know, change the way we teach and, and stuff like that. So, I think just like keeping up with that is really important” (I, Logan).
Knowles’ fourth assumption posits that an adult’s orientation to learning differs from that of children, in respect to time (Knowles, 1970). Adults are driven by a need or problem to be solved that requires immediate application to their practice. Knowles’ fifth and final assumption focuses on the motivation of an adult learner shifting to an internal rather than external emotion (Knowles, 1970). He argues that, “adults are motivated to devote energy to learn something to the extent that they perceive that it will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their life situations” (Knowles, 1990, p. 61). Considering Knowles’ final two assumptions, high-quality teachers want to be able to apply innovative tasks. These two final assumptions are most evident in unison in theme three, Cognitive Processes. Participant confirmations affirmed that professional development experiences that encompassed a combination of active listening, purposeful dialogue and reflection were what allowed them to experience teacher growth through experience. Most specifically, data suggested that adults are motivated to devote energy to stimulating discussions about relevant issues and timely matters that they are facing because they perceive it as beneficial to their growth.

Together, this study’s theoretical framework, related literature, and researcher results provide compelling support for the factors required to ensure success in collaborative professional learning. Knowles’ theory of adult learning is evidenced in each emergent theme, with assumptions most present across the first theme, while themes two and three are best represented in the previous section that summarizes the current study’s results in accordance with other related literature.

**Trustworthiness**

Making meaning from one’s collected data is extremely important, but can also be extremely difficult, especially when the researcher attempts to be an objective recorder and
analyzer of other people’s lived experiences (Lichtman, 2006). To that end, it is essential for qualitative research designs to “ensure rigor without sacrificing the relevance of qualitative research” (Krefting, 1991, p. 174). Reviewing the trustworthiness of qualitative research helps to ensure such rigor (Guba, 1981).

To assess trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985) use four criteria: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability (Toma, 2006). Full definitions of all four criteria, as well as all evidence indicating the ways in which the researcher addressed each criterion, is included in Table 12.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>The ability to establish confidence in the truth of the results for the participants and study context in question “…when what the researcher presents describes the reality of the participants who informed the research in ways that resonate with them” (Toma, 2006, p. 413)</td>
<td>• The researcher biography establishes authority of the researcher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Reflexive field notes were maintained during all interviews and observations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Triangulation of data collection methods were used to compare collected data.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Member checking was performed.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>o Researcher ensured that participants’ perceptions were accurately translated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• An internal audit was conducted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>o The researcher’s advisor was an integral part of data analysis procedures.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transferability</td>
<td>The degree to which the results can be applied to other study contexts or with other participants (Toma, 2006)</td>
<td>• While still maintaining confidentiality, thick descriptions of each individual participant’s questionnaire and interview responses as well as observation time was provided in the results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>o Content of questionnaires and interviews along with complete demographic data concerning teachers and setting as well as descriptive details of the behaviors of the participants during interviews and observations were examined.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 12

**Trustworthiness: Definitions and Evidence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Dependability | The degree of consistency in the results if the inquiry were replicated with the same participants or in a similar study context (Toma, 2006) | • Careful descriptions of procedures and analyses which could allow for replication.  
  • A dependability audit was conducted.  
    o An audit trail of all data collection and analysis processes, including all code-recode strategies, was documented in researcher’s journaling. |
| Confirmability | The degree to which the results are functions solely of the participants and conditions of the study and not of other biases, motivations or perspectives (Toma, 2006) | • Triangulation of data collection methods was used to compare collected data.  
  • Peer examination of transcribed interviews and appropriate coding was conducted.  
    o A confirmability audit was conducted with the researcher’s primary advisor. |

**Summary**

If stakeholders want to see teachers participate meaningfully in improving their practice, they need to rely on research about how schools can promote such purposeful and productive teacher development opportunities.

Two assertions were derived from this research. First, teachers motivated by their own love of learning and desire to grow enter a professional setting where they can take ownership of their growth process through predictable schedules outlined with clear expectations. Second, all professional growth experiences should be an opportunity for teachers to experience active listening, purposeful dialogue, and reflection. These assertions, inclusive of emergent themes, as
well as the implications for education and recommendations for future research, were reviewed and discussed in relation to each of the study’s three research questions earlier in this chapter. In short, it appears when educators are given the opportunity to build their professional relationships with other educators and develop meaningful mutual cohorts centered around a desire to evolve professionally, they afford themselves the chance to adapt and increase their professional competence (Martin et al., 2014). Therefore, with an aim to meet the needs of our ever-evolving student population, it is pertinent to build experiences for teachers who channel their own continued professional growth. In doing so, educational stakeholders should turn to collaborative professional learning.

The results of this study suggest that teacher collaborative learning groups are an effective means for professional development. Collaborative learning groups give teachers the chance to enhance their knowledge, skills, and attitudes for the better (Blank & Sindelar, 1992). It is hoped that this study can encourage school district personnel to consider the factors of a successful collaborative professional learning model (Figure 9) to orchestrate meaningful experiences for their teachers to grow as professionals and improve their practice.
References


Appendices
Appendix A: Teacher Questionnaire
The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect general information as well as a brief account of your perceptions of professional development and teacher growth.

*Your input is greatly appreciated!*

**Instructions:** Questions 1-4 are regarding general demographic information. Please respond on the lines provided.

1. Level of Education: ________________________________
2. Years spent teaching: ________________________________
3. Years spent teaching at Charlie Charming School: ________________
4. Grade(s) and/or Subject(s) taught: ________________________________

**Instructions:** Questions 5-9 are regarding professional development and teacher growth experiences. Please respond in the space provided.

5. What kinds of professional development experiences have you participated in? Briefly describe some of those experiences and your role in them.
6. How has your experience in teacher collaborative learning groups aided in your professional growth?

7. What has been your best professional development experience? What made it the best?

8. Would you be willing to let the researcher contact you for an interview to discuss your school’s collaborative learning group process?

   Circle one: Yes   No

   *If you circled “yes” for question eight, please include your name and provide your best means of contact:

   Contact Information (including name):

   Thank you for your participation in this questionnaire. Your input is greatly appreciated!
Appendix B: Interview Protocol
1. What would you like to tell me about yourself?
   
   *Probes: How do you spend your time? What are you passionate about? How did you come into teaching?*

2. How would you define your philosophy of education?
   
   *Probes: Where does collaboration fall into your philosophy? Where does dialogue fall into your philosophy? How and how often do you self-reflect? What benefits do you find in collaboration, dialogue and/or self-reflection?*

3. How do you view your responsibility to enhance your own professional practice?
   
   *Probes: How do you value professional development? How does your school/administration play into this responsibility? How do you determine your professional development goals? What motivates you to engage in professional development?*

4. How do you view your participation in collaborative learning groups?
   
   *Probes: How typical was/were the experience(s) I observed? How does your participation ever differ? What motivates you to engage in this form of professional development?*

5. What factors lead to your own professional growth?
   
   *Probe: Can you describe a memorable professional growth experience? How have these factors improved your practice?*

6. Given what we have discussed today, what else would you like me to understand about the professional development and/or collaborative learning that takes place at your school?
Appendix C: Head of School Permission Form
December 2018

Dear (Head of School),

I am writing to you as a doctoral candidate of Western Connecticut State University’s Doctor of Education program interested in exploring how teachers are enhancing their professional practice to best impact teaching and learning across K-12 educational environments. For my dissertation, I have chosen to investigate how teachers view professional development as a means to improve their practice, especially in terms of collaborative learning groups.

I feel as though the culture and practices in place at Charlie Charming School align well with my research interests. And, for that reason, I am eager to gain an understanding of the collaborative learning group process that your teachers participate in. I believe that the data gathered from Charlie Charming School will be a worthwhile addition to the educational literature that currently exists and will assist in the professional growth of other K-12 teachers. Please accept this letter as my formal request to conduct my study in your school. This research is anticipated to take place from January to June 2019.

Upon your consent, I will invite your teachers to participate in my study, ask them to complete a questionnaire (up to 30 minutes) and allow me to observe the process of their collaborative learning group time (up to 60 minutes on two occasions). In addition, some teachers will be asked to schedule an interview (up to 45 minutes) during non-instructional time. Throughout my research process, I will act as a non-obtrusive observer, I will arrange to meet with your teachers at times of their convenience, and I will always maintain confidentiality (pseudonyms will be used, and no identifiable information will be shared). Your teachers will be asked to review and sign informed consent form(s) regarding their participation. A second consent form will be asked of those teachers who do schedule an interview. All participant responses will be kept strictly confidential. Privacy will be protected for all participants. If necessary, your teachers may withdraw from my study at any time, with or without reason.

This research project has been reviewed and approved by the WCSU Institutional Review Board. If you have questions concerning the rights of the participants involved in research studies, please email the WCSU Assurances Administrator at irb@wcsu.edu. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Krystina Occhicone

I agree to allow this research study to be conducted in Charlie Charming School:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Head of School Name (Print)</th>
<th>Head of School Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Appendix D: Initial Letter to Teachers
Dear Teacher,

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself. I am writing to you as a doctoral candidate of Western Connecticut State University’s Doctor of Education program, interested in exploring how teachers are enhancing their professional practice to best impact teaching and learning across K-12 educational environments. For my dissertation, I have chosen to investigate how teachers view professional development as a means to improve their practice, especially in terms of collaborative learning groups.

Your Head of School has welcomed me into your school to learn more about your collaborative learning process and I look forward to the time I will be spending at your school! My research is anticipated to take place from December 2018 to June 2019. Ultimately, I believe that the data gathered from your school will be a worthwhile addition to the educational literature that currently exists and will assist in the professional growth of other K-12 teachers.

In short, I will be observing the process of the collaborative learning that takes place at your school on a total of six occasions. Additionally, I will be sending out questionnaires and I will be asking for your willingness to potentially be interviewed.

Throughout my research process, I will act as a non-obtrusive observer, I will always maintain confidentiality (pseudonyms will be used, and no identifiable information will be shared), and if necessary, I will arrange to meet with you at times of your convenience.

If you have further inquiries regarding my proposed research, please email me directly at missocchiconemath@gmail.com. I very much look forward to extending the conversation about how teachers are enhancing their professional practice with this research so please look out for my consent letters at your next collaborative learning group meeting!

Kind Regards,

Krystina Occhicone
Doctoral Candidate
WCSU, Danbury, CT
missocchiconemath@gmail.com
Appendix E: Teacher Consent Form
Dear Teacher,

As you know, I am writing to you as a doctoral candidate of Western Connecticut State University’s Doctor of Education program interested in exploring how teachers are enhancing their professional practice to best impact teaching and learning across K-12 educational environments. For my dissertation, I have chosen to investigate how teachers view professional development as a means to improve their practice, especially in terms of collaborative learning groups.

I feel as though the culture and practices in place at Charlie Charming School align well with my research interests. And, for that reason, I am eager to gain an understanding of the collaborative learning group process that you and your colleagues participate in. I believe that the data gathered from Charlie Charming School will be a worthwhile addition to the educational literature that currently exists and will assist in the professional growth of other K-12 teachers. Please accept this letter as my formal invitation to participate in my research. This research is anticipated to take place from January to June 2019.

Upon your consent, I will ask you to complete a questionnaire (up to 30 minutes) and allow me to observe the process of your collaborative learning group time (up to 60 minutes on two occasions). In addition, I may ask to schedule an interview (up to 45 minutes) with you during non-instructional time. Throughout my research process, I will act as a non-obtrusive observer, I will arrange to meet with you at times of your convenience, and I will always maintain confidentiality (pseudonyms will be used, and no identifiable information will be shared). All participant responses will be kept strictly confidential. Privacy will be protected for all participants. If necessary, you may withdraw from my study at any time, with or without reason.

This research project has been reviewed and approved by the WCSU Institutional Review Board. If you have questions concerning the rights of the participants involved in research studies, please email the WCSU Assurances Administrator. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Krystina Occhicone

I have read and understand the above consent form and agree to participate in this study.

______________________________    ________________________________   ____________
Teacher Name (Print)            Teacher Signature             Date
Appendix F: Interviewee Consent Form
January 2019

Dear Teacher,

Thank you for your continued interest in participating in my study by agreeing to participate in an interview. Please read the statements below carefully, as they describe the conditions for agreeing to participate in an interview regarding your views on professional development, including its means to improving your practice, especially in terms of collaborative learning groups.

During this interview, I understand that:

1. I am volunteering to participate.
2. My name and any other identifying information will not be included within the interview data.
3. The researcher will maintain confidentiality about my responses.
4. This interview will take place with the researcher at a safe, agreed-upon, mutual and convenient location—which may be Internet-based.
5. This interview may take up to 45 minutes of my time.
6. The researcher will take notes.
7. The researcher will use a recording device.
8. I have the right to end the interview at any time, without penalty or consequence.

I, _________________________________, am a teacher at Charlie Charming School. I acknowledge that Ms. Krystina Occhicone has made clear to me the conditions for participating in an interview, and I have had my questions answered. With that, I agree to participate in the interview.

Printed Name of Charlie Charming School teacher: _________________________________

Signature of Charlie Charming School teacher: _________________________________

Date: _________________
Appendix G: Email Sent to Learning Group Facilitator for Observation Scheduling
Hi, Facilitator -

A bit of time has passed since I first reached out to you with an introduction to my research. Hello again! And, once again, thank you for your willingness to participate in my dissertation study.

To update you, at this point in time, I've spent quite a bit of time observing learning groups and interviewing teachers. It truly has been such a rewarding and exciting journey thus far!

I am reaching out to you now because I would like to schedule two observations with your learning group. I am hoping to observe twice: on April 10th and April 24th--if that would be okay with you! As a reminder, I will just be a fly on the wall observing the process of the learning group time.

Thank you again in advance as I very much look forward to extending the conversation about how teachers are enhancing their professional practice with this research!

I look forward to hearing back from you soon!

Kind Regards,

Krystina Occhicone
Doctoral Candidate
Appendix H: Sample of Researcher Descriptive Field Notes
"didn't have anything meaningful to share then, but do now..."

shares experience of student choice, small groups (mini lesson vs workshop) by

why not a big group?

responds: feels less teacher centered

- less/no HW
- less
- more interaction

"what I'm wondering...?"

"feeling it out..." +

sharpening with lots of eye contact, others looking on + "right,
giggle, umm..." mentions connects to

question: assess how?

"same problem": shares what she's doing

- thing that I struggle with - grade that rewards behavior

makes suggestion + "I like that!"

alarm goes off +

suggestion for progress report: all 3 write note of it!

"think it's VIP for student to assess..."

"I didn't look forward to big group!"
Appendix I: Sample Email to Interviewee
Hi, Participant –

It was a great experience for me to sit in your Wednesday morning meeting a few weeks back. Thank you for welcoming me in!

Because you responded to my questionnaire that you would be willing to schedule an interview with me, I am wondering what your availability might be over the next few weeks--I am looking for up to 45 minutes of your time. I can be flexible to come to Charlie Charming School during the week or I am also flexible to meet over a weekend at a mutual location.

I look forward to hearing back and scheduling something that works best for you!

Kind Regards,

_Krystina Occhicone_
Doctoral Candidate
Appendix J: List of Codes and Frequency of Occurrence
## Theme One: Intrinsic Motivation

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*Note.* Q = Questionnaire; I = Interview; O = Observation
### Theme Two: Positive Participation

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**Category total** 113

**Theme total** 113

*Note. Q = Questionnaire; I = Interview; O = Observation*
EdD in Instructional Leadership
Department of Education and Educational Psychology
Dissertation Registration Form

Student  Krystina Occhicone  Date  May 9, 2020

Dissertation Title: Teacher Voices on Enhancing Their Practice through Collaborative Professional Learning

Dissertation Committee Members: Refer to Dissertation Approval Page

For Office Use Only.

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Dissertation Committee Chair  Signature  Date

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