How Middle Grades Teachers Experience a Collaborative Culture: 
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract
Collaboration is a powerful tool for professional development that creates opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practice. However, school districts continue to have difficulty both implementing and sustaining collaboration. The purpose of this research was to investigate the experiences the teachers in a creative, instructional collaboration. This study yielded several observations. The first was that teachers can experience successful, high-level collaboration in which they perceive a sense of satisfaction, mutuality, trust, and growth. For five middle grades teachers in a private, faith-based school, their satisfactory experience with collaboration was teacher-initiated. When participating teachers believed that they had power over their collaboration, they perceived the collaborative experience as productive to the extent that they were able to engage in collegial learning. The teachers in this study found that teacher-initiated collaboration offered them trust and they were more comfortable, transparent, and open with their partners. They were more willing to question their existing approaches and try new ones. The results also supported the claim that teacher collaboration can facilitate school reform. Participating teachers felt less isolation and developed more teacher knowledge.

Keywords: collaboration, phenomenology, professional learning community, professional development

Teachers engage in collaboration when they work and learn together to achieve common goals and improve their practice (Datnow, 2011; DuFour, 2005; McInerney & Robert, 2004). It is a working relationship between teachers that is “spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, pervasive across time and space and unpredictable” (Datnow, 2011, p. 148). Collaboration builds morale through the development of shared norms of core practices, reflective dialog, socialization structures, and practices that de-privatize teaching, all of which, in turn, help build a professional learning community (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995).

Collaboration has been a central element of major school reform efforts (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Johnson & Kerper, 1996; Pugach...
& Johnson, 2002). Many school principals and administrators assume that teachers will change their practices in significant ways when they collaborate; that working and planning together is, by itself, a powerful professional development tool (Pugach & Johnson, 2002). However, despite the benefits and importance of collaboration, professional development focused on collaborative learning has not been widely emphasized in the United States and collaborative learning structures are often not sustained over time (Arter, 2001; Kohn, 2002).

Although there is much research on teacher collaboration and the impact of collaborative learning on student learning, there is little current research on how it benefits the teachers as individuals. Given the focus in school reform efforts on teacher collaboration, it may be worthwhile to examine collaboration from the teacher’s perspective in order to gain insight into the meaning they construct from the collaborative experience. Furthermore, a focus on teacher collaboration is particularly salient in the middle grades because of the emphasis on interdisciplinary teaming and common planning at that level (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Dickinson & Erb, 1997; Mertens, Anfara, Caskey, & Flowers, 2013; Warren & Muth, 1995). This qualitative study documented the experiences of a particular group of educators who collaboratively constructed an eighth-grade curriculum with a focus on the meaning they constructed from the planned collaborative experience as it related to their professional growth.

Review of Literature

Benefits of Collaboration

Scholars have identified collaborative practices as being central to professional development because they further opportunities for teachers to establish networks of relationships through which they may reflectively share their practice, revisit beliefs on teaching and learning, and co-construct knowledge (Achinstein, 2002; Chang & Pang, 2006). Researchers also found that collaborative group learning promotes collegiality and is the most powerful form of professional development (Arter, 2001; Garmston & Wellman, 1999; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Zeichner & Somekh, 2009) and that collaborative learning is highly effective at helping to meet the needs of every child in the classroom (Bollough & Gitlin, 2001; Cisar, 2008; Knight, Wiseman, & Cooner, 2000).

Collaboration can be meaningful and empowering for individual participants as they direct their own learning and are motivated to self-reflect (Bandura, 1997, 2006). The social interactions inherent in collaborative practices can improve the quality of teaching and learning as well as the sense of community among teachers, and these healthy, collaborative relationships can have a profound and lasting effect on teacher’s personal and professional lives. When collaboration is teacher-driven, it is more likely to result in student-focused curricula (Christianakis, 2010), and teachers may find this shared process of knowledge creation liberating, empowering, and supportive (Kozar, 2010).

Collaboration also has powerful implications for collective learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hatch, 2007). Teacher collaborative teams can “transform the nature of adult interaction and learning in school by engaging teachers in the same process of continual learning and improvement that we ask our students to strive for in their work” (Chappuis, Chappuis, & Stiggins, 2009, p. 60). Collaboration breaks down teachers’ feelings of isolation (Hargreaves, 1994; Hord, 2007), and teachers who collaborate report increased collaboration after learning together as a community.

Collaboration Theory

Vera John-Steiner (2000) set the stage for research in collaboration by investigating the creative collaborations of a variety of people in art, science, mathematics, medicine, and other fields. She ascertained that scholars must view learning and thinking as a social process (Vygotsky, 1978); they must become a “thought community” in which “knowledge is constructed among a community of persons mutually exchanging ideas and maintaining intellectual interaction” (pp. 4, 119).

John-Steiner found that an individual’s personality is a system rather than a collection of traits. By watching others with whom they work and live, members of a collaborative challenge themselves to try to keep up with other members and to absorb their belief in their capabilities. Those who participate in collaborative relationships develop different emotional resources than those who work in isolation. This relationship of diversity and growth is defined by John-Steiner as complementarity; collaboration benefits from complementarity in skills, experience, and perspectives and creates a passionate interest in the subject matter. This passion is a critical component to sustaining the collaborative.
John-Steiner (2000) noted that collaboration takes time and involves “mutual care-taking” (p. 128). It is the construction of a new mode of thought that involves “stretching the self” (p. 44). Collaboration thrives on diversity of perspectives and on constructive dialogs between individuals who negotiate their differences while they create shared values and vision. It involves flights and resting places of thought. Flights are moments of consciousness that change from one moment to another, and resting places correspond to sustained continuity of awareness of oneself and others involved in the collaboration. Collaboration requires individuals to relinquish aspects of their autonomy, but this results in the broadening of talents and modes of thoughts and enhances individual growth. This, then, contributes to the growth of the group as a whole.

**Collaboration Research**

Researchers have found that inquiry-based collaboration may contribute to individual transformation (Grossman, Winesburg, & Woolworth, 2001), foster positive feelings of teacher efficacy, and engender trusting relationships (Troman, 2000), which can promote teacher effectiveness, foster collegiality, and strengthen the collaboration (Foltos, 2002; Sigurardottir, 2012). Graham (2007) found that collaboration has the potential to transform interactions and school cultures, and Nelson (2005) found that this transformation fostered organizational support for continued teacher collaboration and a professional learning community that contributed to teacher collaboration.

Researchers have also identified positive impacts on student outcomes. Troman (2000) found that the trust developed in healthy collaborative relationships impacted the macro, meso, and micro factors of the organization as a whole and increased student achievement. In a follow-up study, researchers indicated that “schools showing continuous improvement in student results are those whose cultures are permeated by a shared focus, reflective practice, collaboration and partnerships . . . characterized by individuals who focus on student learning, reflect on student achievement and learn as collaborative teams” (O’Neil & Conzemius, 2002, p. 136).

Other studies have also effectively linked teacher collaboration to student achievement (e.g., Goddard, Goddard, & Moran, 2007; Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Olivier, 2008), but these researchers also noted that some members of the teaching staff met collaboration with resistance and unwillingness when teacher collaboration was done strictly for student achievement. However, when teacher collaboration was done for school improvement and teachers were given opportunities to collaborate on curriculum, instruction, and professional development, they were satisfied and the results were gains in student achievement on high-stakes testing.

In sum, collaborative practices are critical for successful professional development and student achievement because they act as a catalyst for teachers to establish networks of relationships, which enable them to reflect, share practices, and revisit their teaching and learning philosophies (Achinstein, 2002; Chan & Pang, 2006).

**Teacher Collaboration in the Middle Grades**

The educational literature offers many models of collaborative arrangements and their potential power for creating change, and it is important to note the nuances of collaboration within a middle grades environment as middle level schools were among the first to institute what was referred to as interdisciplinary teams (see, e.g., Dickinson & Erb, 1997). Because middles level schools were designed to meet the individual needs of students by creating small learning communities, schools created interdisciplinary teams of teachers to make decisions about curriculum and instruction (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). These teams were comprised of teachers from different academic disciplines who taught the same students (Wallace, 2007). Theoretically, the small learning communities would provide teachers with opportunities to get to know the students better and, therefore, better facilitate their needs with excellent results (Alexander & McEwin, 1989; National Middle School Association, 2003; Schaefer, Malu, & Yoon, 2016; Wallace, 2007). Such collaborative models are viewed as essential to teacher learning and, ultimately, to student learning (Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996; Rogers & Babinski, 2002). All of the models assume that teachers can learn when given the opportunity to work together (Brownell, Adams, Sinedar, Waldron, & Vanhove, 2006; Pugach & Johnson, 2002; Trent, 1998). These research findings about the importance of collaboration in changing teacher practice have led to its widespread acceptance as an essential component of any effort aimed at improving teacher learning.

**Obstacles to Collaboration**

Some teachers are reluctant to engage in collaboration despite the benefits. Many teachers are accustomed to teaching in isolation because that is
how they were initially trained (Sternberg, 2003), and teacher individualism is continually reinforced as evidenced by the “Teacher of the Year” or “Staff Member of the Month” awards that formally recognize individual efforts (Robbins & Alvy, 2003). For many teachers, collaboration can represent a marked shift in educational practice as they depart from “tried and true” strategies and engage in a form of inquiry-based learning (Robbins & Alvy, 2003).

Also, teachers are also often misinformed about what constitutes a collaborative (Sternberg, 2003). Some think that teachers can only help a child in their area of expertise; for example, a special education teacher can only help a special education student (Lassonde & Israel, 2010). Teachers also think that the workload will be cut in half (or doubled) or that only one teacher is responsible for writing the lesson plan. Still others think that this is merely another trend that will soon be gone (Lassonde & Israel, 2010). Because they perceive collaboration takes away their autonomy, some teachers are concerned that there will be a mindset of a “group-grade” (i.e., looking at the teachers as a group instead of single contributors to a group) for the teachers and an inability to properly assess the students (Robbins & Alvy, 2003).

Methodology

A qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was chosen for this study (Creswell, 2007; Dean, Smith, & Payne, 2006; Smith, Jarman, & Osborne, 1999). Phenomenological analysis uses an individual’s personal account of an event to produce a subjective view, as opposed to a researcher producing an objective statement of the event (Smith et al., 1999). The aim of IPA is to understand the participant’s view of the phenomenon from an emic, insider’s perspective of the phenomenon in question. IPA notes that one cannot gain access to the participant’s personal world without the use of the researcher; that access is dependent on the researcher’s ability to make sense of the participant’s personal world. The researcher plays a significant role in the process and is required to make sense of the data by engaging in an interpretative relationship with the data (Dean et al., 2006; Smith et al., 1999).

Participants

The study was conducted at a private, Jewish day school in the northeastern United States. The participants included a purposive sample of five eighth-grade faculty who designed a curriculum on the Holocaust for their respective classes totaling 53 students. All but one of the teachers had been employed by the school for a minimum of five years, so the participants had a thorough understanding of the community and the school and had a commitment to their jobs. As depicted in Table 1, the group represented a range of experience and areas of expertise. All participants were between the ages of 45 and 60 years, and all had been teaching their subject areas for over 10 years, and all had previous experience teaching eighth grade. The researcher was a participant in the instructional collaborative. While this allowed her access and an insider’s perspective on the phenomenon under investigation, it also required her to adopt a reflexive stance in order to identify and address her biases throughout the study.

Data Collection

Interpretative phenomenological analysis involves interpreting the “texts of life” (van Manen, 1990, p. 4). The interviews are typically semi-structured because this allows engagement in dialog whereby the initial questions are modified in light of the participants’ responses and the investigator then is able to probe interesting and important ideas (van Manen, 1990). The investigator augments the interview responses with analytic memos, which are write-ups about what the researcher thinks he/she is learning during the course of the interview (Gibbs, 2007). Writing analytic memos is a critical aspect of IPA and can help immensely in writing the results as it provides a summary of the patterns found in the data and is the basis of the researcher’s analysis that will end up in the final report (Krueger, 2014).

Following the advice of Smith and Osborn (2008), the researcher used semi-structured interviews to facilitate an informal, flexible conversation. This allowed the interviewer to probe particular areas of interest that arose and to follow areas pertinent to the research question. The semi-structured interview protocol was informed by relevant research literature, advice of research supervisors, and technical guidance on interview design. The researcher asked questions in an open-ended and non-leading style in order to get as close to the participants’ views as possible and followed each interview with detailed notes about the experience. Notes included initial thoughts, feelings, and impressions as well as elements that might affect the interview such as interruptions or characteristics of the environment in which the interview took place.

Participants were interviewed at school in the privacy of their classrooms. Each interview lasted 30–60 minutes and was audio recorded and
| Pseudonym | Gender |学科 | 年龄 | 教学经验 | 当前学校 | 教学经验 | 年龄 | 教学经验 | 职位 | 年数 | 合作经验 |
|-----------|--------|-----|-----|--------|--------|--------|-----|--------|------|------|---------|
| Allen     | Male   | Science | 8  | 10 (2 in public) | School | 1 | 50 | 5 | Masters | 1 |
| Beatrice  | Female | Language Arts | 15 | 20 (6 in public) | School | 5 | 46 | 0 | Masters | 5 |
| Charles   | Male   | Media Specialist | 25 | 25 (0 in public) | School | 25 | 51 | 12 | Bachelor | 0 |
| Delilah   | Female | Math | 18 | 15 (3 in public) | School | 18 | 37 | 2 | Masters | 3 |
| Erica     | Female | History | 16 | 18 (16 in public) | School | 16 | 52 | 2 | Masters | 3 |
transcribed, with all identifying information either removed or disguised. The written responses of the investigator along with the interview transcripts became the raw data that the researcher analyzed.

**Data Analysis**

The focus of IPA is to understand the essence of the experience. The phenomenon is the “abiding concern” (Anderson & Olsen, 2006, p. 31), and the raw data should be interpreted for the meaning of the lived experience. The researcher writes a description of the phenomenon, maintaining a strong relation to the topic of inquiry (Smith & Olsen, 2008). In this study, the researcher analyzed each interview transcript individually. The researcher engaged in an iterative process of reading and listening to each transcript, during which notes and memos were made in the left-hand margins of the transcript to record anything interesting or significant. The notes and memos constituted a summary of content as well as comments or connections, similarities, differences, contradictions, and preliminary interpretations.

Transcripts were then re-read and the right-hand margins were used to document emerging themes. This involved moving to a higher interpretative level of abstraction, general enough to allow theoretical connections within and across cases while remaining grounded in what the participant actually said (Creswell, 2007). This process was repeated for all five interviews, each interview in its own light, respectively, as separate and individual from the other interviews. Although commonalities in themes were identified, all issues were identified in each transcript as they emerged, thus the researcher paid attention to ways in which accounts from participants were similar or different (Smith & Osborn, 2008). When all five interviews had been analyzed and superordinate themes and theme clusters identified, a master list of themes and sub-themes was created, and this provided a coherent framework for understanding the value the participants assigned to the creative collaborative experience (see Appendix). The master list of themes and sub-themes was translated into a narrative account, as the purpose of an IPA is to try to understand the content and complexity of the participant’s meanings rather than measure their frequency. It involves the investigator engaging in an interpretative relationship with the transcript. Care was taken to ensure that a distinction was made between what the participants said and the researcher’s interpretation.

**Findings**

Overall benefits of the culture of collaboration and its impacts on professional and personal growth were evident in the data. Three main themes emerged: (a) the experience of a collaboration of culture and its three elements—-inclusion and trust, shared leadership, and respect; (b) the experience of collaboration in promoting professional growth; and (c) the belief that collaboration provides personal growth.

**The Experience of Collaboration as a Culture**

Most of the teachers in this study had previous experiences with professional development training focused on teacher collaboration for the purpose of raising student performance. The participants tended to perceive these professional development experiences as remedial activities intended to raise their performance, which negatively impacted their perceptions of themselves as practitioners. The teachers noted that this approach to fostering collaboration undermined their sense of skill, knowledge, and agency and helped give teacher collaboration a negative meaning.

When asked about professional development training in collaboration, the teachers often expressed dissatisfaction. Charles commented, “We drive these long distances to listen to these so-called ‘experts’ and, really, you just come away feeling badly about yourself. They make it seem effortless. I always feel like I am doing something wrong.” Allen expressed similar experiences with professional development focused on collaboration. He said:

> We have people come in or we drive hours to hear someone and it’s meant to help us grow as teachers and be better at what we do, but you know what? It stinks. I actually leave feeling bad about myself because I think, “Wow! This is a great teacher and her ideas are so good, and how the hell does she have the time to be so good? And who at her school helps? And when can I get a job there?”

Prior negative experiences with top-down, mandated professional development in collaboration did not connect with participants’ experiences during the informal, voluntary collaborative work that was the focus of this study. Building a product to teach to their students was meaningful, but even more meaningful, however, was that in the building of the unit they developed a culture of collaboration. They
began to rely on one another for advice and support and became a team, and it was through their efforts as a team that their definition of collaboration morphed from something that was forced to something that was fun.

**A Culture of Inclusion and Trust.** When examining aspects of the culture of collaboration, the teachers noted the importance of feeling included in the group. Trust was an important ingredient that fostered these feelings of inclusion. The development and maintenance of a collaborative relationship allowed for feelings of trust to emerge both in themselves and in their colleagues. The degree to which their colleagues were non-judgmental and supportive allowed trusting relationships to flourish. These trusting relationships allowed for the active participation of the group members, which led to feelings of acceptance that further encouraged their symbiotic relationships. Trust opened up space for participants to be vulnerable and take risks, which, in turn, strengthened trust and feelings of inclusion.

As Delilah commented:

I became a better teacher. Usually, math is not part of a collaborative unit because it is so black and white but I liked being part of a group and it opened my eyes to the students and my colleagues and even myself! They were allowed to shine for me in a different way and I think I shined for them in a different way too. It was an amazing thing! My colleagues liked my idea and let me run with it – even helped me! No one said “Oh that’s lame.” To me, working with these teachers, you become better. I became better. I’m really glad that I was included in this group.

Allen expressed similar sentiments: “No one was territorial! Everyone shared everything and I was really included—not just my stuff. And guess what? They gave it all back! Dumb, I know, but it shows respect. They value my things now as much as I do.”

The teachers in the collaborative were allowed to express their feelings and felt acceptance of themselves and one another. An understanding emerged that the motivation they felt to do more via the collaborative was a result of inclusion and trust. They saw the process as reciprocal and evolving, and that felt they benefited directly from working with one another. It added meaning and value to their work.

**A Culture of Shared Leadership.** Charles described how members of the collaborative shared leadership roles during the planning process.

I felt like part of a bigger picture. The whole unit was so hands-on. And even though we had some junior administrators in our group (department heads), no one person was the ‘boss.’ Everyone shared their strategies and their ideas, what works for them, and the other teachers had an opportunity to learn about different strategies they may not have been aware of or may not have used. I realized it’s okay not to know everything. No one was expecting me to. In the end, we all had our specialties and that guided us but we talked about what we needed to talk about and helped each other. Everyone was in charge and no one was in charge.

The shared responsibility for leadership galvanized the participants as a group, and it increased as the teachers felt included in the collaborative synergy of the team. Allen explained how this method of collaboration provided an outlet for him to share instrumental ideas and gain knowledge by listening to the expertise of his colleagues: “This collaboration brought different teachers together in various ways. We built a community of learners in order to fulfill a goal. I hope it continues.”

As teachers contributed, they viewed each other for the strengths they brought to the collaborative. Beatrice noted:

My colleagues are so intelligent. I knew, but I didn’t know. Allen, for example, so, so smart and really wants us to talk to him and let him share his ideas. And Charles! Wow! I had no idea he had such a vast amount of knowledge and ideas and was so willing to help!

More importantly, as teachers felt a sense of inclusion, trust, and shared leadership, they began to willingly speak about their areas of weakness as they looked to their colleagues for advice and support. Teachers were allowed to develop their areas of weakness without feeling judged. They developed a sense of shared leadership and began not only to exchange lesson ideas, but suggestions for supporting students who exhibited challenging behavior.

**A Culture of Respect.** A sense of mutual respect was a salient aspect of the culture of the collaborative. Inclusion and trust, coupled with the
feelings of shared leadership in their colleagues, furthered the respect they developed for both their colleagues and the collaboration itself. The spirit of camaraderie in a culture of collaboration led to a heightened sense of mutual respect. In collaboration, equal partners work together to move things forward. The collaboration prompted participants to share their expertise. Allen noted: “I was not afraid to speak up—to offer my ideas. I felt valued by the group and as they saw what I could do, I think they valued me more—maybe even liked me!” Beatrice shared: “I always respected my colleagues as co-workers. I came to see them differently in this project. Now I respect them as my friends.” Charles expressed a major shift in the way he felt respected among his colleagues, and he connected the change directly to his engagement with the collaborative.

No one really truly respected me here. Not as a teacher. I was the librarian. I had resources. Worst of all, if they needed coverage for a teacher it was me. I was a babysitter. What we did here together - this made me part of the team. They needed my knowledge and expertise. They needed me. I could see in their eyes that they really came to respect how smart I was – maybe even valuable to them. Now, they run ideas by me. They ask for my help in advance. Now we have library periods and I teach a separate unit of study to the kids and its valued. Now I’m respected as a teacher.

Unlike the top-down, mandated professional development they had experienced before, the collaboration that was the focus of this study did not emphasize or focus on the need for the teachers to reform or remediate their teaching. Rather, they formed a collaborative culture by exchanging thoughts and ideas as to how to best teach their students. The feelings of inclusion felt by the teachers as they built the unit led to the sharing of leadership roles. The shared leadership among all of the participants increased their sense of ownership in the unit and enriched their collaborative experience. As they worked together on the unit, their respect for one another increased. They sought input on everything from their colleagues and they all helped one another in every facet of the unit as the leadership was shared.

The Experience of Collaboration in Promoting Professional Growth
Teachers in this study formed a collaborative to construct a unit plan with the students in mind. The collaboration was never intended as a forum for their own professional development; yet, professional development occurred as each teacher noted professional growth throughout the duration of the collaboration. Their sense of professional growth came directly from the feedback they received from their colleagues in form of compliments, advice offered and taken, and helpful actions—simply lending a hand to each other in order to help things progress.

Their professional growth was aided by a resurgent awareness of the reasons why they became teachers in the first place—to make a difference in the lives of their students. All of the teachers believed that past professional development experiences focused on the strict adherence to standards and remediation stifled their creativity and prevented them from growing as teachers. They expressed feelings of discontent with their work and an inability to affect change in the lives of their students. Charles expressed it as feeling “stuck in neutral” and Delilah noted feeling “kinda stuck.” Similarly, Erica commented: “The expectations of me are always changing. I feel like I am constantly re-writing my curriculum. Standards change and they are confusing; parents complain and I have to change something. You feel stuck. I don’t really make a difference here. I feel like a robot.”

These feelings of “being stuck” were evidence that all of the participants felt a lack of professional growth. While they wanted to work to make a difference in the lives of their students, the opportunities for professional development did not make a difference in the professional growth of their craft. They attributed this lack of professional growth and feelings of inadequacy to the lack of time needed to work together.

Reciprocity that developed from trust and inclusion further enhanced collegial inquiry; the more the teachers learned and saw the students learning, the more they wanted to learn and have their students continue learning. They sensed clear value in this engagement as has been seen by Leonard (2003), who noted that a known benefit of collaboration lies in the concept of pooled intelligence. This concept is founded upon the premise that collaboration prompted all participants to share their expertise, thus increasing the knowledge and skill of all members of the group and enhancing the feelings of inclusion.

The importance of shared strategies and ideas as well as lesson plan development provided conversations
about the students and the strategies involved in teaching them as individuals. They felt secure and confident in their ability to teach their subjects and grew in confidence when it came to each individual student and the nuances of teaching some of the more challenging ones. These feelings of confidence came as a direct result of their teamwork.

The establishment of a collaborative culture served to return teachers to the intrinsic meaning of why they entered the profession. Their belief was that they could make a difference in the lives of children. The teachers felt that showing students how much they cared for them—both emotionally and educationally—fueled growth in their students. It also provided their students with confidence and interest in their learning. They believed that they as teachers made a difference by caring about the child as a whole and facilitating personal transformation within each student.

**The Belief That Collaboration Provides Personal Growth**

This collaborative facilitated a process of collegial relationship-building that amplified the expertise of each individual and made the instructional unit they planned a success. But the collegial relationships did something else—they opened the doors for personal interactions and personal growth. “Talking shop” became just talking. During her interview, Delilah expressed the personal growth she experienced.

> With this project, I wasn’t going at it alone. I felt I had friends and we were in it together. In fact, I was the one who screwed up! . . . Through all of this, there was a lot going on in my personal life. They knew that. They all just pitched in and helped. I felt so loved and supported. I realized that I don’t have to be perfect—that I work with a group of teachers that care. I wish we could do more of this!

All of the teachers said that they had grown as individuals on a personal level and noted feelings of satisfaction as a result of having “work friends” and people with whom they could share things. These feelings enhanced the culture of collaboration and allowed for the growth of each participant through mutual respect and a sense of worth. Feelings of personal satisfaction and even joy in the entire process of this collaboration emerged from all of the teacher interviews. It also led to the personal growth of each member of the group as they came to work with the realization that they were respected, trusted, and valued.

**Discussion**

Although researchers have examined the impact on student achievement resulting from professional development using instructional collaboratives (Arter, 2001; DuFour, 2005; Garmston & Wellman, 1999; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Zeichner & Somekh, 2009), a gap exists in the research connecting collaboration to a teacher’s professional growth. The primary goal of this research was to interpret how middle level educators experienced a creative, collaborative curriculum activity. The varied viewpoints offered by these participants provided the researcher with data and personal stories that exemplified the phenomenon of teacher collaboration in a private, faith-based school context. This study extended prior research by highlighting that respect, inclusion, shared leadership, and trust are not separate, discrete elements but are instead interrelated elements that together build a culture of collaboration.

**Collaboration as Professional Growth**

In each interview, the teachers spoke about the collegiality that was established and how this collegiality fostered professional growth. In fact, the data suggests educators in the study were not motivated by extrinsic rewards at all, but instead found their motivation in how they served others. The participants found that “making a difference” addressed their need for autonomy and relatedness. None of the participants indicated that the collaboration was free from stressors. However, they were able to put stressors into perspective by having colleagues who served as buffers and problem-solvers, and this collegiality helped them to feel safe in expressing openly their stressors to one another. Stress and anxiety were replaced by plans and implementation, thus increasing their job satisfaction by providing the necessary intrinsic motivators.

Each teacher in this study indicated that there was insufficient time allotted during the school day for teacher planning time. In particular, they commented that formal curriculum meetings rarely focused on the curriculum among grade-level teachers but instead tended to focus on subject areas, which the teachers did not find useful. They also were adamant about the need for time to work together and talk as teachers. The lack of allotted time and subsequent follow-through on workshops indicated that more structured time was needed to implement effectively new knowledge and ideas acquired during these new learning experiences. This is consistent with findings
in the research literature on common planning time (Mertens et al., 2013; Warren & Muth, 1995).

**Collaboration as Personal Growth**

The study provided several results that were unanticipated. The first was that teachers can experience successful, high-level collaboration in which they perceive a sense of satisfaction, mutuality, trust, and growth. For the five middle grades teachers in this study, their satisfactory experience with collaboration was teacher-initiated. When the participating teachers felt that they had power over their collaboration, they perceived the collaborative experience to be productive to the extent that they were able to engage in collegial learning (John-Steiner, 2000). They were also more willing to question their existing approaches and try new ones (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

One of the more important observations from this study was the emphasis the faculty placed on both “being wanted” and on engagement with the students. The participating teachers’ students seemed to be more engaged in the learning when faculty and students were both engaged in the learning process.

The value of collaboration for all of the participants was evident in the shared sense of accountability for student learning that all of the teachers expressed. The expectations each teacher had for the others helped establish a positive culture of interdependence that made all teachers feel like they were part of group-based decisions. Through collaboration, the teachers discussed the individual differences, developmental levels, and prior experiences that affected the student’s understanding of materials (Bruner, 1968), and together they used their expert knowledge of content to create sequenced learning opportunities for their students. These types of learning opportunities demonstrated innovative instruction intended to help both teachers and students develop a deeper, more lasting, and meaningful understanding of content and information.

**Implications for Research and Practice**

Collaboration has the potential for creating a renewal in education by combining the strengths of two or more individuals in productive relationships that can positively influence student learning. Moving toward powerful collaborative relationships involving greater intensity and commitment may propel greater learning for both the students and teachers. As they learned together, the teachers in this study felt a particular sense of accountability to their working partners. The power of collaboration is in the socialization of teachers learning together and being exposed to diverse opinions and distinct teaching and communication styles. As illustrated in this study, collaboration involves teachers working as equal partners in ways that have the potential to transform education.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study focused on the teacher experience in the collaborative, yet there are other aspects of collaboration in various contexts that researchers can undertake. Studies can be conducted across several departments or grade levels in both elementary and secondary schools that would allow investigators to compare and contrast grade levels with this study. In addition, researchers could investigate the various stressors and motivations among staff members, which would add to the research on teacher motivation and the potential power struggles within a teacher-led collaborative. The differences in individual perceptions and definitions of collaboration could also generate new areas of research, including the dynamics of power within a collaborative, seniority status of the teacher, and ethnic and racial diversity within different collaborative teams. It could also be interesting to study the rate of assimilation of novice teachers using teacher-driven collaboratives. Finally, studies could explore ways in which students make a difference in teacher-driven collaborations. Researchers might investigate whether teacher-driven collaboration bridges any gaps or affects student test scores or self-efficacy.

**Implications for Professional Practice**

Private, faith-based schools have lacked consistency in the implementation and execution of collaborative professional learning (Drago-Severson, 2012; Eggleston- Hackney, 1998; Lucilio, 2009; Mayotte, Wei, Lamphier, & Doyle, 2013). The unique nature of this study’s context provided an opportunity to examine how school leaders and teachers in a private school setting can develop strong, collaborative learning experiences for middle grades teachers by providing time for teachers to work together in an atmosphere that does not pressure teachers to remediate or reform their work. By providing the necessary culture for collaboration, school leaders can engender collegial and trusting relationships with all members of the school community and help foster the emergence of professional learning communities in which teachers can hone their craft.
In addition to this study’s significance for school leaders, this study provided understanding of how a collaborative culture is built. Teachers viewed collaboration that they initiated as more valuable to them than those collaborations in their past that had been mandated or initiated by the school’s administration, and a perception of teacher ownership in the formation of the collaborative relationships seemed to promote teacher satisfaction with the experience. The centrality of teacher agency in this study aligns with the findings of Kreisberg (1992), who observed that when individuals find “ways to satisfy their desire and to fulfill their interests without imposing on one another” (p. 85), they develop a relationship of co-agency. It appears that for the teachers in this study, perceptions of mutuality and co-agency were best achieved with small groups rather than larger groups of teammates.

The findings also align with those of Schneider and Snyder (1975), who found that the way in which individuals establish support helps to form their systems of norms, expectations, and values. This, in turn, improves job satisfaction and teacher practices are enhanced by this solid foundation due to clear goals, plans, and expectations. Teachers are also more aware of their direction and the direction of their school. When teachers believe that they have the trust and respect of their colleagues, they are not afraid to share their leadership and expertise, and this promotes personal growth.

**Conclusion**

For the teachers in this study, collaboration encouraged camaraderie, and through this camaraderie the teachers’ trust in one another deepened; they felt included in the decisions of the team and the leadership was shared. This deepened the members’ respect for one another and created a culture of collaboration. Establishing support for the collaboration through trust, inclusion, shared leadership, and respect provided the participants with a solid base to develop strong support systems. This base allowed them to feel confident in their own abilities, and this confidence allowed them to focus on the issues unique to their subject matter or students. Through this understanding, they moved forward to build a collaborative rooted in teacher personal growth.

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### Trust in My Work Environment

“I worked with a colleague on a project, but I had to keep it to myself.”

“We did some great things together, she and I, but I was afraid to let anyone know.”

“They always questioned me. Is it just conversation or a set-up?”

### Support for My Work

“I wanted to do more, but I got this attitude of ‘Don’t play in my pool’”

“There was just no respect for what I do.”

“I’m not just smart in my subject.”

“I feel like I was there to babysit sometimes—don’t they know what I can do?”

“Did they get how much I have to offer? Why don’t they value me?”

### Sharing

“I would want to help but sometimes I needed help too.”

“I have so much to give!”

“Why can’t the teachers talk more? It’s like they are afraid that we were talking.”

“I felt alone. I wanted to do things with my fellow teachers.”

### Wanting to Work without Fear

“I always felt judged.”

“It was a constant evaluation – no matter how mundane the topic.”

“I never felt like I had a friend.”

“I felt like I was constantly being watched and judged.”

### Collegiality

“I wish I had work friends.”

“I wish they knew that I’m not just smart in my subject.”

“I have so many resources – not just babysitting services.”

(Continued)
I wanted to do more but it was always resisted.”

**Making a Difference**

“I’m here because I want to be.”

“I love my job and I love these kids.”

“I really make a difference sometimes I think.”

**Growth**

“I learned so much about myself!”

“I love that I was accepted for what I do.”

“I really have learned so much – about me and my friends.”

“I’m a better person for what I do.”