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# The Role of the School Leader in Collaboration Between Regular and Special Education Teachers

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THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL LEADER IN  
COLLABORATION BETWEEN REGULAR AND SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

by

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Requirement for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

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### **Abstract**

In 2004, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) aligned to language found in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA 2004). This reauthorization required students with disabilities to have access to the same curriculum as their non-disabled peers. This language means that practices in instruction and assessment for students with disabilities must be aligned to the academic content standards established in each state (Parrish & Stodden, 2009). The purpose of this study was to evaluate the role of school leadership within the context of teacher collaboration and the factors that contribute to their level of leadership and participation. The design of this research process focused on exploring and understanding the role of school leaders in rural public school settings in collaborative process between general and special educators. Qualitative research where the researcher will subscribe to the social constructivism paradigm and a phenomenological hermeneutic method were used. The scope of the study consisted of observing regular and special education teachers engaged in a collaborative planning and delivery of instruction followed by interviews with school leaders.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

In 2004, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) aligned to language found in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA 2004). This reauthorization required students with disabilities to have access to the same curriculum as their non-disabled peers. This language means that practices in instruction and assessment for students with disabilities must be aligned to the academic content standards established in each state (Parrish & Stodden, 2009). Therefore, the planning, delivery and assessment of instruction for general and special education students would benefit by a collaboration between general and special education teachers.

However, the specialty of general and special education teachers is different. Whereas general education teachers are trained in providing instruction in core content areas, special education teachers are trained to provide specially designed instruction to meet the learning characteristics of students with disabilities. The alignment of these two acts has caused education professionals across the two disciplines to collaborate in order to refine their teaching practices to meet the needs of all learners, including students with disabilities. The intent of this collaboration is to improve the performance outcomes of all students.

In addition to the accountability alignment, the acts also require that students with disabilities receive their education from a highly qualified teacher in environments with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible. Therefore, general and special education teachers are delivering instruction collaboratively in order to meet these requirements through co-teaching methods. In co-teaching, the specialties of these teachers complement each other in order to the diverse needs of students. The intent of this collaboration, then, is to raise the

achievement outcomes of students with disabilities by combining content and instructional design into one seamless system of instruction.

Furthermore, ESEA and IDEIA have increased the school administrators' role in leading instruction. School leaders are now responsible for ensuring that all state and federal policies for accountability are met within their buildings. To meet these needs, leaders are promoting a collaborative planning process among educators (Fullan, 2002; Halverson, Grigg, Pritchett & Thomas, 2007). Instructional leadership has led teachers to expect school leaders to have a thorough understanding of the student population and how it performs compared to similar schools across the district. Additionally, teachers expect school leaders to establish achievement goals that best meet the needs of the school's student population.

To gain this understanding, school leaders commonly analyze student and teacher performance data on state accountability measures. Analyzing this data allows the leader to draw conclusions about student and teacher strengths and weaknesses. Then, they use the data to guide decision making. Additionally, in analyzing student and teacher performance data, the school leader obtains baseline information they can use in order to monitor progress over the course of the year. Once analyzed and interpreted, achievement goals are created that will be measured by performance on accountability measures for all students, including those with disabilities (Correa & Wagner, 2011; Cruzeiro & Morgan, 2006; Fullan, 2002; Garner & Forbes, 2013; Halverson, Grigg, Pritchett & Thomas, 2007).

Most commonly, when state test results are issued, a building principal reviews results in each content area at the student and teacher level. Traditionally, this occurs before the start of a new school year. Then the data is used to help drive decision making in terms of student placement set goals for groups of historically underperforming students, and how to place staff

based on the outcomes of their previous students. For example, when a student displays weaknesses in math, they are placed with a teacher who produces high results on accountability measures. This placement is thought to benefit the student because of the teacher's skills.

Once decisions such as this are made, school leaders share them with constituents and use the data to justify their decision making. This practice helps teachers understand the principal's decision making process. It also allows teachers to review, analyze, and have open discussions about data together creating an environment that supports collegial conversations. As a result, the metaphorical brick and mortar separating teachers' practice from one another is being replaced by open collegial discourse, idea exchange, and resource sharing.

However, this collegial discussion is impacted by the different backgrounds, experience, and various specialties teachers and school leaders bring with them. Varying backgrounds and training leads to different perspectives about the abilities of students which has an impact on collaboration (Beeby 2011; Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Kay 2011; McConkey 2004). The impact is seen when individuals come together and the varying perspectives have influence over individuals. Additionally, they impact the way individual teacher provide instruction every day from what materials and resources they use and how they use them. Taken together, individual beliefs influence interpersonal relationships between administrators and teachers, teachers and their colleagues, and teachers with their students. Also, individual beliefs impact the ability and willingness for a teacher to refine their individual instructional practices that influence achievement outcomes of students (Yavus & Bas, 2010). Therefore, when working together on shared decision making for students, professionals need to understand the tenants of what fosters positive interpersonal relationships between colleagues for collaboration to be successful.

The word collaboration has become a commonly used term by educators to describe how they work together in planning for and implementing instruction. However, teachers are often times left to collaborate with little direction and little or no participation from school leaders as the process unfolds. For exchanges between education professionals to positively impact student achievement, it is felt that the role of the school leader is important. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the role of school leadership within the context of teacher collaboration and the factors that contribute to their level of leadership and participation.

### **Background of the Problem**

**No Child Left Behind and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.** Since 2001, collaboration between general and special education teachers has become increasingly important. This importance stems from wording contained in the No Child Left Behind Act which states that all students must access the general curriculum by a highly qualified teacher (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain and Shamberger 2010). Additionally, the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act emphasized that students with disabilities be educated in their least restrictive environment (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain and Shamberger 2010). The combination of these two acts has education professionals across disciplines using collaboration as a means to satisfy these requirements. Therefore, when addressing issues of collaboration in the context of students with disabilities, school leaders and educators must be fully aware of the characteristics of effective collaboration in order to increase these students' achievement.

Additionally, in 2004 the United States Federal Government reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) to align with wording found in the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) surrounding the issue of accountability (Hardman, Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005; Thornton, Hill & Usinger, 2006). This drew attention to achievement levels of

students with disabilities. Traditionally, the performance of this group of students on accountability measures yielded negative results. Students were not meeting proficiency levels set by states on accountability measures that tested essential knowledge in core content areas. Additionally, in reviewing data on the achievement gains from year to year, this group of students made little to no progress. Now, under the alignment of IDEIA and NCLB, students with disabilities are to be held accountable to competence in core academic subjects, just as their non-disabled peers (Thornton, Hill & Usinger, 2006). This has caused students with disabilities to receive their special education services through standards aligned instructional practices.

Prior to the legislation, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act held students accountable to making sufficient progress on annual goals found in a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) as developed by the student's IEP team. Student success was based on progress monitoring on these goals by the teachers working with the student. Teachers collect data on students' performance from classroom based measures and use it to determine if the student was making progress toward the goal. If it was determined that a student was not making the goals set in their IEP, the team comes back together to modify the expectations set for the student. This practice created an inconsistent level of expectation for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities were not held accountable to the same learning expectations as their non-disabled peers. Therefore, the expectations of students with disabilities to be held accountable to state content standards has forced general and special education teachers to work collaboratively to educate students with disabilities.

**Characteristics of Rural Schools.** Rural schools possess both positive and negative characteristics that can have an impact on the collaborative process. Most apparent are characteristics of high poverty, limited availability of resources, and out dated facilities (Chance

& Segura 2009; Matsumoto & Brown-Welty 2009). Also, as funds from state government are decreasing, leaders are scrutinizing budgets and making cuts in programs. These cuts impact class size, program reduction such as music or art classes, and that availability of instructional materials. Because of these limitations, school leaders are faced with having to make difficult decisions on how to spend financial resources and trying to decide how those decisions will impact students. This adds to the variables teachers must consider when planning, delivering, and assessing instruction.

Additionally, school leaders are identified in small and rural school districts as having to serve in multiple roles (Masumoto & Brown-Welty 2009; Starr & White 2008). Often, principals serve schools without an assistant carrying all functions of managing a school as well as being an instructional leader. They keep inventory on text books, coordinate transportation, and handle all student discipline, parent communication, teacher questions/concerns, and school budgets. Therefore, time for leaders to spend on the identification of problems and solutions becomes limited due to the small numbers of administrators and other ancillary staff such as directors and supervisors. Because of this, teachers are expected to do more with little support from their administrators.

Rural schools also possess positive characteristics that lend themselves to successful collaborative practices. Small communities often times share similar values, have a long history with one another, share religious communities, and have strong parental involvement (Chance & Segura 2009; Matsumoto & Brown-Welty 2009). These community ties often make it easier for school leaders to have strong relationships due to the knowledge of community resources, connections to families, and shared values and interests. Therefore, school leaders enter into arenas of collaboration where strong relationships already exist and can tap into the community

for support. This support can enhance the functions of the school by tapping into available rescues in areas where the school is deficient. For example, a university partnership may utilize professors to help guide teachers in collaboration when the school leader is not able to participate fully.

When the alignment of IDEIA and NCLB occurred, leaders of rural schools found themselves at an advantage. Because of the size of many schools in rural communities, the population of students with disabilities was such that they did not make standards for participation in state accountability testing. Thus, states allowed these students to fall through the “accountability cracks” (p. 116) (Thornton, Hill, & Usinger, 2006). This created a delay in how programming for students with disabilities occurred in rural schools as compared to their larger counterparts. Because they were not monitored, implementation of the two acts was not done with fidelity.

However, over time, as states began to require high percentages of student participation in each district, school leaders began to scrutinize their common programming for students with disabilities and started to make changes to their normal teaching practices. Where students with disabilities had been receiving their education in a self-contained classroom from a special education teacher, now students are receiving instruction from a highly qualified content specific teacher in the general education environment (Hardman, Rosenberg, & Singular, 2005). Combined with deficits in resources, staff, and funds this has become challenging to rural schools.

**Co-Teaching.** Including students with disabilities in general education settings has been the trend in education since the alignment of ESEA and IDEIA has occurred. Students with disabilities are receiving their special education services from their special education teacher in

conjunction with a general education content expert in a variety of school environments. The specialties that each of these professionals can offer each other are felt to have a positive influence over student achievement. This practice has become known as co-teaching.

The success of co-teaching hinges mainly on the attitude, knowledge, and beliefs of school leaders teachers in inclusive schools. When studied, these attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs have produced mixed feelings (Ross-Hill, 2009). According to Ross-Hill (2009) “...possible complications that might exist during learning situations and while communicating (p. 189).” “...for example inclusion, curriculum deficiency, legal implications, social implications, and standardized testing mandates amongst others: (p.189) (Ross-Hill, 2009). To help overcome these complications, school leaders have come to rely on collaboration between general and special education professionals. Teachers’ participation in professional learning communities, collaborative planning, and team meetings are becoming common practice (Bruce & Flynn, 2013). These activities rely on professionals coming together to work as a group in order to develop solutions to problems present in their school communities, often times relevant to the instruction that they provide in an effort to improve student achievement. In other words, school leaders are using their influence over teachers to impact the outcomes of students and to bolster the concept of educators working together to foster such outcomes (Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

### **Significance of the Study**

The federal government’s alignment of IDEIA to the ESEA act in 2004 brought attention to the achievement of students receiving special education services. According to the United States Department of education, students with disabilities in 8th grade had, on average, a 28% pass rate in Mathematics and a 35% pass rate in Reading during the 2012-2013 school year.



(ed.gov, 2015). These pass rates are of great concern to school leaders and the general/special educators working under them. In an effort to improve these results, school leaders have included students with disabilities into general education environments (Roden, Borgemenke, & Holt, 2013; Telfer & Howley, 2014). Inclusion allows for students with disabilities to receive their education from content experts in conjunction with special educators who specialize in individualized instruction. Telfer & Howley (2014) state that “Many educators and policy makers—including those from the United States Department of Education — view the improved achievement of students with disabilities through the use of inclusive education practices as an important social justice issue” (p. 3).

In order for inclusive education to be successful, school leaders are engaging teachers across disciplines in collaborative processes to develop ways in which they can meet the individual needs of students with disabilities. The school leader’s role in these processes also impacts their success. Several researchers have found that administrators are responsible for fostering a culture within their schools that involves effective facilitation of collaboration through the structures and behaviors that they implement (Berebitsky, Goddard & Carlisle, 2014; Ketterlin-Geller, Baumer & Lichon, 2015). Once established, teachers are then enabled to strengthen their instruction as a result of their participation in a collaborative process (Bruce & Flynn, 2013; Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen & Grissom, 2015). By strengthening their instruction, the achievement rates of students with disabilities will also be enhanced.

Schools where teachers felt a high level of support for collaboration had higher levels of achievement (Berebitsky, Goddard, & Carlisle, 2014; Bruce & Flynn, 2013). These results suggest that the principal's role in shaping collaboration processes for teachers is critical to the organizational change that takes place when forming a school climate that values teacher

collaboration ultimately raising the achievement of students with disabilities. However, Friend (2002) states “Although I could make many recommendations about specific ideas and strategies for promoting collaborative practices in schools, the very first and most fundamental one would be to raise teachers’ and administrators’ understanding of and commitment to collaboration as a critical part of school functioning, and then to extend that understanding to the general community (Friend, 2002). Therefore, a definition of collaboration is offered with characteristics that will support effective collaboration and models school leaders could implement for collaboration to take place.

### **Research Questions**

Evaluative methodology requires a researcher to carefully select a research question. Therefore, research questions from the phenomenological hermeneutical method that acknowledges lived experiences have an impact on the research process were used to assess the effectiveness of leadership roles in collaboration. These research questions sought to clarify the nature of the investigation regarding how school leaders in rural geographic regions are facilitating effective collaboration between general and special education staff, and how the school leader perceived the effectiveness of collaboration in a state that requires standards aligned instruction for all students, including students with disabilities. This qualitative study investigated the following questions.

### **Overarching question**

How does the rural school leader participate in collaborative practices between general and special education teachers?

### **Sub questions**

- a. Do the leadership qualities of school leaders in rural schools impact the productivity during collaborative opportunities given to general and special education teachers?
- b. How do school leaders in rural school districts perceive the effectiveness of collaboration between general and special education teachers?

### **Overview of Methodology**

The design of this research process focuses on exploring and understanding the role of school leaders in rural public school settings in collaborative process between general and special educators. The methodology selected involves qualitative research where the researcher subscribed to the social constructivism paradigm believing that universal truths about an administrator's role in collaboration cannot exist because of the multiple perspectives teachers and administrators have about leadership, personality, character, students, and learning (Hayes & Singh, 2012). Additionally, a phenomenological hermeneutic method where the researcher sought to interpret the meaning of participants' experiences with collaboration was used (Lindseth & Norbert, 2004). The goal was to interpret how rural school leaders facilitate and participate in collaboration between general and special education staff. To gain as much information as possible during this research, critical incidence data collection techniques were utilized. Observations, individual interviews, and a review of notes, reports, or documents that address the topic were conducted.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The primary limitation to this study was its focus on one region within a large rural state. The study also was limited to the interpretations of the principals of a limited number of schools in the region due to the fact that half the districts asked to participate could not because they did

not practice co-teaching. Principals who participated provided lived experiences due to their previous work histories and role as instructional leaders. Teachers who were observed during the study were supervised directly by these leaders. Planning time of these teachers was not observed due to teachers not having dedicated time during their day to have these meetings. This impacted the study because many characteristics identified to positively impact collaboration would have been seen during these times. The researcher also did not consider using special education district leaders as participants. Through the study it was noted that in several incidences, the school leader did not directly supervise special education staff members. Therefore, by including district special education leaders, the school leader's role in collaboration could have been enhanced. Finally, the study did not include perceptions of teachers about the role of the school leader in their collaborative processes, nor did it interview teachers about their involvement.

### **Organization of the Study**

This qualitative research study is organized into five chapters. A review of literature is present in Chapter II, a description of methodology in Chapter III, results and data analysis in Chapter IV, and discussion of the findings, implications, implications, and recommendations for further research in Chapter V. References and appendices are also provided.

### **Operational Definitions**

Operational definitions for key terms in this study include the following:

**General Education.** The educational experience of typically developing children. The content of this curriculum is defined by State Standards, which are established by the state's department of education. This is the Free and Appropriate Public Education against which the

program of a student who receives special education is evaluated (<http://special.ed.about.com/od/glossary/g/regulatededucation.htm>).

**Rural.** Rural consists of all territory, population, and housing units located outside Urbanized Areas and Urban Clusters. Urbanized area consists of densely developed territory that contains 50,000 or more people. An urban cluster consists of densely developed territory that has at least 2,500 people but fewer than 50,000 people ([census.gov https://www.census.gov/geo/reference/gtc/gtc\\_urbanrural.html](https://www.census.gov/geo/reference/gtc/gtc_urbanrural.html)).

**School Leader.** School leaders influence learning primarily by setting goals and establishing conditions that support teachers and help students succeed (Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

**Special Education.** Instruction designed to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities. This instruction is offered at no cost to parents. Special education may take place in inclusive classroom settings, special education or self-contained classrooms, the student's home, a rehabilitation facility, or a hospital (Walter, 2006, p.22).

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of Literature**

The collaborative process becomes important for education professionals because of the requirements set through the alignment of the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004. Throughout this literature review, the researcher presents a definition of collaboration, the characteristics of effective collaboration, and several models of collaboration. The discussion includes characteristics of collaboration for both teachers and school leaders that will benefit general and special educators. Included is an overview of the co-teaching methodology for educators to gain a better understanding of what school leaders are promoting in many school environments to meet federal requirements. Lastly, this literature review will highlight characteristics specific to school leaders that create an environment conducive to the collaborative process.

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration is term openly used by educators to describe how they work together across disciplines. Educators use the term to describe how they plan for, deliver, and assess instruction with other teaching professionals. In fact, collaboration is so commonly used that teacher preparation programs are making efforts to prepare students to become effective collaborators (Anderson, 2013; Clark-Luque & Latunde, 2014; Hamman, Lechtenberger, Griffin-Shirley, & Zhou, 2013; Milteniene & Venclovaite, 2012). By adding this component to teacher preparation programs, it is felt that teachers will enter the field better prepared to work with their colleagues from other disciplines.

Although efforts are being made to prepare teachers to collaborate before they enter the field, when reviewing collaborative processes between and among education professionals, the

work is often misunderstood and the support of school leadership is missing (Clark-Louque & Latunde, 2014; Hantzidiamantis, 2011). Therefore, it is important for school leaders and educators to be knowledgeable about collaborative processes so that schools can effectively work together toward improving student achievement. Additionally, educators should have a better understanding of the co-teaching model which is commonly used in schools to address these requirements. This section will construct a thorough in-depth definition of collaboration, discuss the characteristics necessary in order for collaboration to be successful, and provide information on several different approaches to collaboration.

### **Definition of Collaboration**

Collaboration is a term commonly used when addressing how educators work together to make improvements in planning, instructing, and assessing students. However, this term is one often misunderstood (Hantzidiamantis, 2011). An in-depth definition that builds from the root term to how collaboration relates to education professionals is necessary in order for educators to fully understand the meaning of collaboration. The term collaboration is derived from the term “colabre or co-labor, which means working together” (Welch, 1998, p. 121). Simply put, any interaction between two or more people who are engaged in labor can be considered collaboration. Qualifying the interaction of two or more people as intensive suggests that that the work being done is comprehensive, thorough, or in-depth.

According to Snell & Janney (2005) “working together means that positive interdependence exists among team members who agree to pool and partition their resources and rewards and to operate from a foundation of shared values” (p. 6). They further developed the understanding of collaboration from their recent predecessors by focusing on the relationships and interactions of the individuals engaged in the act of collaborating. The intensity of the work

being done is dependent on the ability of the individuals collaborating to have a positive influence on each other. Furthermore, the collaborators agree to gather and share their individual resources throughout their collaboration (Snell & Janney, 2005). Lastly, they add that the individuals' working together relate to each other through shared values (Snell & Janney, 2005).

Thayer-Bacon and Brown's (1995) concept of collaboration is "the interaction that takes place between and among people who are in a changing relation with each other and are able to mutually communicate through a shared verbal and nonverbal language therefore, they are potentially able to influence each other (p. 7). (Thayer-Bacon & Brown, 1995). This definition compliments Snell and Janney by suggesting the relationship, or interdependence, of collaborators changes based on the way they understand the interactions they have with each other. In collaborative effort individual educators working together should understand each other's actions and words and be able to interpret them in a way that can influence a change in one another. This meaning of collaboration highlights the importance of shared values among educators. The shared value needs to be seen, heard, and understood by those engaged in collaboration in order for it to occur (Thayer-Bacon & Brown, 1995).

Adding to the previous conceptual understandings of collaboration, Idol, Nevin & Paolucci-Whitcomb articulated collaboration as a process allowing people with diverse expertise to generate solutions to mutually defined problems (Van Garderne, Stormont, & Goel, 2012). Whereas prior definitions focused on the relationships and interpersonal skills between individuals working together, Idol, Nevin & Paolucci-Whitcomb add a layer of accountability to the interaction by stating that groups collaborate to solve problems.

Carrea, Jones, Thomas, & Morsink (2005) define collaboration between educators as "a mutual effort to plan, implement, and evaluate the educational program for a given student"



(p.5). This definition offers to educators that the collaboration they participate in is intended to refine their planning, teaching, and assessment practices in order to reach students. When done together the individual experiences, knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs about preparing, implementing, and assessing instruction can empower teachers to identify and solve problems surrounding a student's educational performance (Cerra, Jones, Thomas & Morsink, 2005).

Taken together, these definitions suggest that collaboration occurs when educators from diverse backgrounds who have shared values work together to influence each other's practice. The change that takes place in planning, instructing and assessing a student's education takes place in order to solve an identified problem relating to a student's success. Educators who have an understanding of this term are able to use it to describe the interactions they have with each other more appropriately.

### **Characteristics for Successful Collaboration**

Several characteristics for successful collaboration between educators have been identified (Thayer-Bacon & Brown, 1995). These characteristics include participants' ability to: share information about students; possess a deep understanding and knowledge of curriculum; be self-aware of their practice; and possess interpersonal skills. Additionally, throughout the process the collaborative team should consist of multiple perspectives; and be able to work under established roles (Fisher, Frey & Thousand, 2003; Friend & Cook, 2003; Jones, 2011; Ripley, 1997; Thayer-Bacon & Brown, 1995; Voltz, Elliott & Cobb, 1994; West & Cannon, 2001). A description of these characteristics is provided for educators to evaluate and refine their own abilities in the collaborative practices.

**Sharing information about students.** Educators should have a general understanding and share learner characteristics about the population of student they are working with.

Understanding these learner's characteristics allows teachers to collaborate on ways to provide and monitor instruction specific to the student population (Jones, 2011). For example, all teachers working with students who have disabilities should understand the characteristics of the disability, not just the special education teacher (Jones, 2011; Voltz, Elliott, & Cobb, 1994). Understanding that students with Autism Spectrum Disorder display deficits in communication, social skills, and appropriate behaviors allows educators to plan ways to support these deficits during instruction (SITE). These deficits may be supported by teachers increasing the use of visual strategies or integrating sensory stimulation into instruction. Ripley (1997) finds value in teachers collaborating about all aspects of teaching including classroom routines, procedures, and room design to best meet the needs of the student population (Ripley, 1997). Teachers who collaborate this way become co-teachers in the sense that what used to be done individually for students is now shared responsibility (Ripley, 1997).

Student specific information should also be shared among and between teachers. Voltz, Elliott, & Cobb (1994) note that teachers use conversations about individual students to plan and deliver instruction. Communicating student learning styles, strengths, weaknesses, behavior interventions, and the contents of a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) provides teachers with individual student information needed to plan instruction (Jones, 2011; Voltz, Elliott, & Cobb, 1994; West & Cannon, 2001). Student specific information allows teachers to understand each student in their classroom. Knowing students this way allows the teacher to consider ways to individually support students during instruction (Jones, 2011; Voltz, Elliott, & Cobb, 1994; West & Cannon, 2001). This may be done by considering if where a student sits during instruction impacts their performance. However, Jones (2011) finds that teachers try to reinvent the wheel too frequently when trying to plan for ways to support individual students.

Specific strategies and techniques already found to be successful with individual students should be shared with other teachers from year to year (Jones, 2011).

Despite knowing information about the general student population and student specific information, teachers find that they are not prepared for collaboration because of a lack of knowledge about different disciplines in education (Voltz, Elliott, & Cobb, 1994). Teachers working collaboratively need to share information about their disciplines to better understand each other's relationship to students (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, Shamberger, 2010; Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Ripley, 1997; Van Garderen, Stormont, & Goel, 2012; Voltz, Elliott, & Cobb, 1994; West & Cannon, 2001). For example, teachers, counselors and specialists may all collaborate in planning for a student's needs. If the group does not understand each other's role, confusion and misunderstanding could occur because the group does not know why they have been asked to collaborate. The group will not know what each member has to offer the student. Sharing information about each other's function on the team allows teachers to understanding and plan for each other's role in the classroom as it pertains to meeting student need.

Sharing information is an important characteristic in collaboration. Sharing information about the student population, student learning styles, strengths, weaknesses, and information contained in an IEP is essential. Additionally, teachers need to share information about the roles and functions of their jobs to have a better understanding of their relationship as it pertains to students. This sharing of information will allow for educators to be fully informed about what they are working together on and why.

**Possess a deep understanding and knowledge of curriculum.** Having a deep understanding of the school's curriculum is also necessary for successful collaboration.

Knowing the school's curriculum is important because teachers working collaboratively will share the same understanding of expectations set by the school district for learning (Fisher, Frey & Thousand, 2003; Ripley, 1997). Teachers who understand the depth, breadth, and learning progressions of their school's curriculum are able to align instruction to meet a student's needs (Pellegrino, Weiss, Regan, & Mann, 2014; Sharpe, Hawes, 2003). This common understanding will help facilitate focused discussion about where a student performs compared to curriculum expectations.

Despite its importance, Fisher, Frey, & Thousand (2003) found that not all educators have knowledge of their school's curriculum (Fisher, Frey, & Thousand, 2003). Special education teachers leaving preparation programs feel unprepared to provide instruction in the general education curriculum due to lack of knowledge about what is expected in the curriculum (Fisher, Frey & Thousand, 2003; Schlessman-Frost & Saunders, 1993). As a result, the relationship between teachers becomes unequal and impacts the ability for general and special education teachers to collaborate together (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain & Shamberger, 2014; Santamaria & Thousand, 2004; Voltz & Elliott, 1997). Furthermore, Voltz, Elliott, & Cobb (1994) found in their study that general educators' view of their special education colleagues was that of a glorified teaching assistant and special educators reportedly do not feel they are serving necessary functions in working with colleagues across educational environments when this knowledge was missing (Voltz, Elliott & Cobb, 1994).

In order to maximize collaborative processes focused at improving student achievement, educators should possess a deep understanding and knowledge of their school's curriculum. Having this type of knowledge will allow for teachers to have meaningful discussions about where students present themselves in comparison to the expectations of the school district.

Additionally, curriculum knowledge will address the disparity in roles between general and special education teachers. Possessing a deep understanding and knowledge of curriculum will enhance the special education teacher's role in collaboration.

**Self-awareness of teaching practices.** Having a sense of self awareness about teaching practices also benefits the collaborative process. Educators become self-aware by developing perspective about their teaching practices. To develop perspective, teachers need to interrogate their assumptions and beliefs about what they do. Educators who examine assumptions and beliefs about their practices are better able to make changes that will impact the way students learn (Friend, 2000; Jones 2011; Ripley 1997; Voltz, Elliott 1997; Voltz, Elliott, Cobb 1994).

This becomes important in collaboration when multiple perspectives come together to share ideas about ways to refine instruction for students. Individual teachers are able to offer to ways they have refined instruction that may be benefit others. Fisher, Frey and Thousand (2003) found this important when educating students with disabilities. They found that during collaboration, the integrating of multiple perspectives of teaching practices is required for effective inclusion to take place (Fisher, Frey & Thousand, 2003). The multiple perspectives lend way for collaboration to occur to find solutions to issues presented by students with disabilities. When multiple perspectives come together, educators can work together to address individual student needs as well as the characteristics of a student's disability.

Having a sense of self awareness of one's teaching practice is developed by a professional interrogating their own assumptions and beliefs. By interrogating the assumptions and beliefs about teaching practice, an educator is able to refine what they do in order to meet the needs of students. This perspective becomes important in collaboration because it allows for multiple ideas to come together in order to meet the needs presented by students. This is extremely

beneficial in inclusion because of the learner and disability characteristics presented by students who receive special education services.

**Possession of interpersonal skills.** Arguably, the most important characteristics in effective collaboration are the interpersonal skills of team members. The ability to work together with others is dependent upon the attitude, beliefs, and actions of each individual involved (Friend, 2000). To help facilitate an effective collaborative culture, a positive attitude, the professional responsibility, commitment, respect, and confidence that each individual possess should have a positive impact on the obtainment of a shared goal (Edwards, Abel, Easton, Herbster, Sparapani, 1996; Friend, 2000; Hernandez, 2013; Juarez-Dappe, 2011; Lorenz, 1999; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Schlessman-Frost, Saunders, 1993; Thayer-Bacon & Brown, 1995). Therefore, when establishing collaborative groups, considering the interpersonal skills of individuals assigned to collaborate will impact the effectiveness of the process. Individuals who possess a positive attitude, possess professional responsibility, are committed, respectful, and confident in their practice will be able to provide valuable contributions to the collaborative process.

When these characteristics are not displayed, it impacts the ability to provide valuable contributor to discussion and blocks problem solving throughout the collaborative process (Lorenz, 1999; Friend, 2000). Additionally, the respect, trust, and communication lines between individual teachers working together are impacted and leads to dissent between these professionals (Hernandez, 2013; Thayer-Bacon & Brown, 1995). Lack of discussion, trust, respect, and broken lines of communication will impact the way collaborators treat one another and will draw attention from reaching the end goal. Participants will respond to the emotion and not address how to address the problem they are working together in solving.

Collaborators' interpersonal skills have an impact on the relationships between individuals working together. Possessing a positive attitude, professional responsibility, a sense of commitment, respect, and confidence will lead to effective collaboration. When participants do not display these characteristics, discussion leading to problem solving is blocked. Additionally, the cohesiveness of the group does not take place leading to emotion about individuals instead of working together to solve a problem.

**A team with multiple perspectives.** The presence of multiple perspectives on a collaborative team is crucial to collaboration. The ability to problem solve as a group is often based on experiences each team member brings with them to the process (Voltz, Elliott & Cobb 1994). Through experiences, individuals gain unique perspective they are able to use during collaboration to help solve problems. The benefit of this is that educators can use the perspective of others to learn new strategies and refine their own teaching practices. Therefore it is important for educators to be opened about their experiences so that the multiple perspectives can become apparent to enhance problem solving during collaboration (Jones 2011; Ripley 1997; Voltz, Elliott, 1997; Voltz, Elliott & Cobb, 1994). Understanding individual perspectives will also lead a safe environment where teachers respect each other, listen to various thoughts, and seek to understand each other (Voltz, Elliott & Cobb, 1994).

**Working in a defined role.** The process of defining the role each team member serves in during collaboration impacts the process. Establishing roles involves individuals to determine each other's role in planning, instructing, and assessing student achievement. In doing this, the team will have a common understanding of how each professional functions in supporting students. Understanding the functions of each individual will help in collaboration by eliminating confusion about who is doing what through the process. Teams should take

advantage of the individual strengths and specialties their colleagues possess when defining roles. They should capitalize on these strengths and specialties to come to a common understanding where they will best impact the process. Establishing roles this way will lead to a seamless system of instructional practice (Lorenz 1999; Ripley, 1997; Voltz, Elliott, 1997; Voltz, Elliott & Cobb, 1994).

However, defining roles can be the hardest piece to accomplish for a team. Educators need to shift thinking from having their own process to having a shared process of identifying problems, establishing goals, and planning for instruction (Ripley, 1997). This difficulty indicates that the teachers are not communicating about their responsibilities in instruction to establish roles. Therefore, educators need to have deliberate meaningful discussions about their expectations of each other and non-negotiable practices they employ in order to work as a team (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2014).

Once established, Lorenz (1999) points out that this team needs to be extremely flexible when working with students who have disabilities. This flexibility is necessary because of the characteristics that define a student's disability (Lorenz, 1999). The disability characteristics that require such flexibility are aggressive behaviors, hyperactivity, poor social skills, deficits in communication, withdraw, and stifled achievement. To help establish a seamless system of instruction, teaching teams should establish specific roles and non-negotiable practices that address these characteristics and be willing to modify them when new issues present themselves. Additionally, school leaders should consider educating professional on the appropriate roles and expectations of general and special educators, instructional specialists, behavior consultants, reading specialists, and math coaches who often participate in a student's instructional team.



Sharing this knowledge with teachers will enable them to become fully informed about all education professionals that may be working in collaboration with each other.

### **Approaches to Collaboration**

In education, the word collaboration is commonly used to describe how teachers and school leaders work together. The increased use of collaboration in planning for students' education has come as a result of the microscope school leaders are under in terms of the performance of their students. As leaders of learning organizations, school administrators should take efforts to prepare their teachers for collaboration aimed at improving outcomes for students. In becoming familiar with different approaches to collaboration, school leaders and teachers can refine their practices for more effective collaboration. The multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and transformative approaches to collaboration are described below. Each approach below takes into consideration the disciplines represented within an educational community and emphasizes the roles of each one. Additionally, the co-teaching methodology is described due to its increased popularity in public school settings.

**Multidisciplinary approach.** The multidisciplinary approach to collaboration occurs when multiple disciplines act independently on the same case (Carpenter, King-Sears & Keys, 1998; Stepans, Thomason, & Buchanan, 2002). A prime example between general and special education exists throughout the process of determining a student eligible for special education services. This process is done during the creation and implementation of an individualized education plan. These processes specifically require by law a multidisciplinary team consisting of general education teachers, special education teachers, administrators, parents, and specialists (such as occupational, speech, and physical therapists) to work together in the assessment, identification, planning, and education of students with disabilities. Each member of the

multidisciplinary team fulfills their duties by considering student characteristics as they pertain to their specialty. For example, an occupational therapist serves as the expert on fine motor abilities and contributes this knowledge to the team when considering an individual student.

The overall approach of the multidisciplinary model assumes that each discipline is represented by a specialist from a field where a student displays weaknesses and is capable of serving and providing professional input on students in need of their specialty (Kritikos, LeDosquent, & Melton, 2012). This multidisciplinary approach can be seen in providing services to students when they are removed from educational settings containing their non-disabled peers in order to receive a specialized service in another location. For example, a student who displays difficulty in navigating school hallways due to identified gross motor deficits may leave the environment of their non-disabled peer in order to receive physical therapy from a therapist specially trained in addressing the student's deficits. Or, a student may receive instruction in language arts with his/her non-disabled peers but then receive additional support from a reading specialist in a separate environment. In this model, peers from throughout the school working on improving similar skills come together to receive intervention. Whereas a team of professionals work together to support a student in the classroom, a specialist trained in understanding and teaching specific skills areas like gross motor and reading abilities provides additional support to students. This presents isolation of other disciplines and service providers working toward student success during intervention.

It is noted that even with the presence of many disciplines, the involvement of each discipline is limited within this approach (Kritikos, LeDosquent, & Melton, 2012). This can be due to inability to line up schedules, a lack of financial resources available to pay for the substitutes that would allow for all professionals working with students to attend meetings,

personality conflicts between team members, or lack of knowledge about the resources available within a school by administrators. To address this limited involvement and foster effective collaboration, the creative exchange approach can be used. The creative exchange approach was designed to pull together disciplines that were acting independently at the university level when in teacher training and eventually bled into other fields (Fleischmann & Hutchison, 2012). This is evident when viewing program requirements for degrees and certification programs. Often, course requirements extend through different colleges to make a well-rounded graduate. Degree candidates for education leadership may take courses in statistics, or special educators will receive instruction in linguistics because of the many disabilities that contain communication weaknesses as a disability characteristic. Creative exchange is collaboration that supports the specialty of disciplines and is based on exchanging ideas and fostering debate between disciplines, creating dialogue between students, staff, and society (Fleischmann & Hutchison, 2012).

Collaborative teams working on providing education to students with disabilities engage in the creative exchange approach when they discuss student progress on IEP goals. The process of determining progress on these goals involves professionals reviewing student products. As a team, the products are evaluated to determine if the student is on the right path to successful goal attainment. Progress is determined by educators engaging in dialog among a team and, when necessary, exchanging ideas and debating expectations of the student to revise the goal to ensure student success.

**Interdisciplinary approach.** The interdisciplinary approach attempts to create enhanced coordination and cooperative engagement among disciplines (Carpenter et al., 1998). In other words, speech therapists who often work collaboratively with teams of teachers may problem

solve a student characteristic with another speech therapist and take this information back to a multidisciplinary team. The purpose is to gather input and information from colleagues in the same specialty in order to enhance services provided to students. The problem solving occurs within the speech specialty to gain different perspectives and gather unknown resources to benefit a student.

This approach results in professionals considering students within their own individual specialty area together. Student characteristics are discussed within the specialty and outcomes are discussed to engage in planning for programming (Kritikos et al., 2012). Different from the multidisciplinary approach, this form of collaboration relies on the interaction among professionals where each is dependent on the other to accomplish the goals or complete the task at hand (Bronstein, 2003). The goal of this approach is to utilize the knowledge of many professionals within the same discipline to problem solve for a student's difficulties. The goal of this problem solving is to produce interventions and strategies that will help increase student success. Often, teacher teams across subject and grade levels work together to plan for instruction or to plan for interventions for students using an interdisciplinary approach. Whereas this model enhances the exchange of information due to all team members being of the same discipline, the different specialty of team members created boundaries between disciplines that impacted the flow of information (Carpenter et al., 1998; Stepans et al., 2002). For example, special educators are trained to work with many different disabilities. As a department within a school, these educators use the interdisciplinary approach in department meetings.

However, through experience the amount of knowledge they have on each disability differs. A teacher that has worked with students who have learning disabilities for twenty years, a teacher in the field for two years working with students on the Autism spectrum, and a teacher

with nine years of experience working with students who have emotional disturbances all work in the same discipline, but have very specific skills and strategies to bring to the table pertaining to their individual specialty. Laura Bronstien developed a model for interdisciplinary collaboration based on a multidisciplinary theory of collaboration, services integration, role theory, and ecological systems theory. Bronstein viewed the interdisciplinary approach through the lens of a social worker needing to collaborate as a function of a job role. She found that a model of interdisciplinary collaboration needed to include the following components, two of which stand out from typical characteristics of collaboration (Bronstein, 2007).

1. Interdependence
2. Newly Created Professional Activities
3. Flexibility
4. Collective Ownership of Goals
5. Reflection on Process

The first two components stand out and highlight this model as interdisciplinary in nature. Interdependence suggests that through this collaborative approach, the success of professionals depends on each other's disciplines working together (Bronstein, 2003). The knowledge of a teacher of the visually impaired is necessary for planning for the education of a student with a visual impairment because of the level of training they had in vision. This dependence leads to newly created professional activities which are created only because a group of professionals were able to work together to develop them and are thought not to be created from working independently (Bronstein, 2003). A general education teacher may add braille to all classroom signs that allow for a student who is blind to access these signs. This activity is not one that a general educator would do without the input of the vision specialist.

**Transdisciplinary approach.** In the 1960's, the transdisciplinary approach was developed to coordinate therapeutic and medical services for infants and then refined by the United Cerebral Palsy National Collaborative in order to provide a "comprehensive and coordinated assessment system" (Stepans et al., 2002, p. 239) to provide a comprehensive system for children with severe and profound disabilities (Campbell, 1987; Stephans, Thompson, & Buchanan, 2002). This approach is felt to be more effective than the multi- and inter-disciplinary approaches by creating a team structure and service delivery across disciplines.

This structure involves strong communication, the exchange of knowledge, and a strong focus on the child (Carpenter et al., 1998; Downing & Baily, 1990; Downing & Baily, 1990; Stepans et al., 2002). Often times in Special Education classrooms, teachers, therapists, and other specialists coordinate the development and implementation of services for students with significant disabilities. Programming and services are developed in the form of goals for students and service providers work to support the goals. This is noted typically in an IEP when occupational therapists working as specialists support academic goals, or when physical therapists coordinate their services with education professionals to address gross motor ability in students. The transdisciplinary approach utilizes each team member's specialty by mixing services within a student's programs and services (Downing & Baily, 1990; York, Rainforth, & Giangreco, 1990). This mix is seen when a student is receiving instruction by a content specialist, such as an English teacher, while having modifications made to instructional materials made by a special education teacher and still an occupational therapist working on pencil grasp all within the same environment at the same time. Each specialty is delivered within the normal education program of the student.

**Transformative approach.** This approach focuses emphasis on the relationship between members of the collaborative team, whereas the multi-, inner-, and transdisciplinary approaches focus on the specialty of team members (Swartz & Triscari, 2011). Within this approach during the collaborative process, education professionals experience a transformation of perspective by interrogating their own assumptions in an effort to create new knowledge among team members (Swartz & Triscari, 2011). Professional learning communities strive to transform this perspective. This new knowledge then serves as a baseline of the relationship, measuring from it where the new knowledge leads the group. Like the other approaches, this model relies on education professionals working together toward a shared goal.

When discussing with teachers what they think of when the word collaboration is used, often they will report that it is joint planning for the implementation and evaluation of instruction (Kimmel, 2012). This approach to teacher collaboration lends way for an often times homogeneous group of professionals (e.g. second grade teaching team, special education department, math teachers) to examine and reflect on their current practice and the expectations of administrators to develop new approaches to teaching. This can be accomplished by using The Five Step Process in Applied Collaboration developed by Michael Sharpe and Maureen Hawes (Sharpe & Hawes, 2003). This process includes:

1. Review the expectation
2. Discuss the learning needs of students
3. Decide on student accommodations and who will implement them
4. Monitor, adjust, and provide for formative feedback
5. Evaluate students using established criteria

Another example of the transformative approach could lead to an individual teacher or a group of teachers embarking on action research. Collaborative action research involves teachers working together to research an identified problem, propose an intervention, gather and analyze data, to develop a theory (Bruce, Flynn, & Staff-Peterson 2011). As we are involved in standards aligned instruction and high stakes accountability, teachers have many opportunities to collaborate using action research. With the use of research based interventions receiving so much attention, teachers have the opportunity to explore interventions and test them within the context of their classrooms for effectiveness through this process.

**Co-teaching Method.**

A popular trend in schools is to include students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers. This trend has forced general and special education professionals to work together to provide instruction to students with and without disabilities in the same environment. This approach to collaboration between educators is known as the co-teaching method. Also known as the cooperative teaching or collaborative teaching approach, these models can be considered the same in the evolution of addressing services of students with disabilities in an inclusive environment (Rainforth & England, 1997; Welch, 1998b).

Co-teaching involves general and special education professionals working together in the same classroom environment to provide educational services to students with and without disabilities (Rainforth & England, 1997). Therefore, all models of co-teaching require at least two professionals to work in a classroom setting to address the characteristics of all learners (Rainforth & England, 1997; Welch, 1998). Every model of co-teaching focuses on the expertise of each professional in the environment. Whereas these professionals are within the same discipline like in an interdisciplinary approach, the level of their expertise in addressing



students can look like a multidisciplinary approach to working with student needs. Additionally, a large emphasis of co teaching is placed on the relationship of the teachers within the function of the classroom. This includes the teaching team determining a shared understanding of classroom routines, clarity on classroom teacher responsibilities, and open communication about non-negotiable feelings and beliefs about learning and learners (Friend, 2011).

**Collaboration within teacher teams.** Collaboration between teachers for the purpose of co-teaching involves utilizing the specialties of many people across different disciplines in the field (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain & Shamberger, 2010; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Jones, 2011; Murawski & Hughes, 2009). In conjunction with the roles and characteristics of teachers professionals also need to recognize and appreciate the differences in the roles and responsibilities of general and special educators. This will foster a respectful and cooperative relationship between colleagues working together for student success and aid in effective collaboration.

In order to gain a common understanding of students in order to work together for educational benefit in the areas of learning, behavior, achievement, and attendance, teachers across disciplines need to be open to sharing their knowledge with each other (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain & Shamberger, 2010; Jones, 2011). General education professional need to share curriculum and instructional practices with special educators just as special educators should share disability characteristics and special education regulations with general educators. This sharing will lead to a common understanding of the roles each teacher will play as they implement co-teaching strategies within an educational environment. Additionally, special education professional should devote time and energy to becoming familiar with curriculum expectations set by the district.

**Implementation of co-teaching.** The implementation of co-teaching brings additional points for teachers across disciplines to consider through collaboration. Friend and colleagues point out the importance of teachers understanding their role within the co-teaching environment but also the perceptions of co-teaching and its impact on student success (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain & Shamberger, 2010). Whereas perceptions that are positive in nature between professionals could lead to a successful co-teaching partnership, those that are different could make co-teaching difficult for teams of teachers. This is because co-teachers should implement shared responsibility for decision making on teaching strategies, expectations in different educational environments, accountability, and problem solving when it comes to addressing individualized needs of students (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Jones, 2011; Murawski & Hughes, 2009). By collaborating in this way, teachers will gain respect for their colleagues and use others' specialties to help achieve the goal of student achievement.

Effective collaboration within teacher teams through co-teaching needs to also be supported by administrators. Administrators must take into careful consideration the scheduling of teachers and students to allow for opportunities of co-teaching to take place and be sure professionals are prepared and trained in co-teaching practices (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain & Shamberger, 2010; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Riehl, 2000). If left solely up to teachers to figure out, efforts to incorporate co-teaching into a student's educational experience will be disorganized and difficult to achieve given the variables of multiple schedules and lack of knowledge about how to implement co-teaching for student success. Additionally, administration should foster the meaning of diversity within their buildings, promote inclusive environments that respect and value diversity, and build connections between the school and its community (Reihl, 2000). These acts will help the

administrator establish a positive school climate where employees are open to working with diverse learners and their families in addition to working together. The success of this approach is seen when students become collaborative learners by emulating the skills in collaboration their teachers model, co-teacher capitalize on the specialized knowledge, skills, and instructional strategies of their colleagues, classroom structures are based on research proved strategies, teachers come up with solutions that traditional school structures are unable to examine, and teachers feel empowered by having shared problem solving and decision making (Pellegrino, Weiss, Regan, & Mann, 2014; Santamaria & Thousand, 2004).

### **School Leaders' As Collaborators**

As instructional leaders, the job of school administrators is increasingly becoming scrutinized based on the success of students. This scrutiny has caused school leaders to challenge the everyday practices of their staff in order to foster student success. As the leader of a learning organization, administrators are taking advantage of the strengths and specialties of those around them and expecting teachers to do the same. Whereas the school leader must be knowledgeable of the characteristics that make the process of collaboration successful for teachers, they also should be knowledgeable about their role in the process. This section will differentiate the school leaders' role in the collaborative process.

### **School Leaders' Role in Collaboration**

The members of a schools' leadership team are important to establishing an effective collaborative environment (Berebitsky, Goddard & Carlisle, 2014; Fullan, 2002; Halverson, Grigg, Pritchett & Thomas, 2007; Ketterlin-Geller, Baumer & Lichon, 2015). Actions taken by this group involves providing not only strong characteristics of leadership but also effective interpersonal skills and the ability to recognize educator's need for resources (Fisher, Frey &

Thousand 2003; Friend 2000; Lorenz 1999; Ripley 1997; Voltz & Elliott 1996; Voltz, Elliott & Cobb 1994; West & Cannon 1988). Like teachers, school leaders must also have knowledge about and awareness of their educational environments to identify issues that need to be addressed within the school (Friend, 2011; Ripley, 1997). Once areas of concern have been identified, leadership teams must have the ability to provide solutions (Correa & Wagner, 2011; Cruzeiro & Morgan, 2006; Fullan, 2002; Garner & Forbes, 2013; Halverson, Grigg, Pritchett & Thomas, 2007).

These solutions need to be prioritized and communicated with teachers in order to maintain organization toward achieving a goal (Friend, 2000; Voltz, Elliott 1996). These actions require members of leadership teams to possess the characteristics similar to those of teachers in order to collaborate with each other. Just as is expected of teachers, administrators need to value differences, show respect for others, and be comfortable in their role (Friend 2000). Strong interpersonal skills, effective communication, knowledge of roles among the team, positive attitude, and the ability to work as a team are all characteristics that this team must be able to demonstrate.

However, these are not the only characteristics leadership teams must possess. School administrators and teacher leaders must also possess strong technical skills in effective instruction and problem solving (Voltz, Elliott, & Cobb 1994; West & Cannon 1988). Like teachers, this means they have solid knowledge of curriculum, are able to identify ways to modify instruction, and was to accommodate different learners (Fisher, Frey & Thousand, 2003). Educational leaders are able to collaborate with constituents and have the ability to work with them in developing solutions to problems specific to their roles within the school. This collaboration will show support for teachers and help establish positive relationships between

leadership teams and other staff members in a school (Fisher, Frey & Thousand, 2003). Problem solving specific issues draws attention to a leader's ability to deal with the many different personality characteristics educators bring to the table.

Since an expectation is for school leaders to support teachers they need to be flexible in working with groups of different people. Leaders must always remain focused on outcomes and keep in mind that plans change but the end goal should remain the same (Fisher, Frey & Thousand, 2003; Lorenz, 1999; Ripley, 1997). School Leaders can guide teams through their work by being focused and flexible. This can be done by developing systems that monitor progress towards the goal. These systems should also take into consideration the different personalities and individual characteristics of the team so that the leader is able to maintain positive relationships and effective communication with group members. These relationships in conjunction with the ability to motivate teams to keep working toward success will result in effective collaboration between teachers and school leaders (Ripley, 1997).

Aside from working directly with teachers to solve issues within the learning environment, the school leader needs to commit to providing resources for teachers that allow them to work together in a collaborative fashion toward achieving a shared goal. These resources include planning for the financial means to allow time for planning/collaboration and resources used to assist in planning such as manipulative items, books, instructional materials, and opportunities professional development (Friend 2000; Ripley, 1997). In addition to showing support of teachers toward reaching shared goals, these resources provide for the ability to work together and obtain any tangible items that needed to accomplish a task. Professional development will enable school staff to gain knowledge and skills pertaining to particular topics. However, if these things are not provided, collaboration must be achieved by using existing

resources which can sometimes be a barrier in achieving goals. Therefore, this commitment from school leadership will foster the collaborative process.

The commitment from school leaders to provide professional development for staff is paramount in collaborating toward shared goals. Without continued learning, educators can become complacent in their position. Leaders should be ready, willing, and able to grow their own staff within the field. In order to do this, providing resources for teacher including opportunities continued professional education for staff members must take place.

Lastly, leadership teams should work diligently to ensure that sharing of information occurs. Throughout the collaborative process, school leaders should disseminate all information pertaining to the progress toward goals in order to keep everyone informed and offer a variety of professional development activities for staff on an ongoing basis (Ripley, 1997; Voltz & Elliott, 1996). Therefore, information gathered through the established monitoring steps should be shared with constituents. Doing this will result in everyone who is involved discussing and problem solving using the same information at the same time as others. Keeping everyone involved fully informed will help keep progress on achieving shared goals through collaboration moving in a forward direction.

### **Chapter III**

#### **Methodology**

The design of this research process focuses on exploring and understanding the role of school leaders in rural public school settings in the collaborative process between general and special educators. The methodology selected involves qualitative research. The research subscribed to the social constructivism paradigm believing that universal truths about an administrator's role in collaboration cannot exist because of the multiple perspectives teachers and administrators have about leadership, personality, character, students, and learning (Hayes & Singh, 2012). Additionally, a phenomenological hermeneutic method where the researcher sought to interpret the meaning of participants' role in collaboration was used (Lindseth & Norbert, 2004). The goal was to interpret how rural school leaders facilitate and participate in collaboration between general and special education staff. To gain as much information as possible during this research, critical incidence data collection techniques were used. Observations, individual interviews, and a review of notes, reports, or documents that address the topic were conducted.

In recent years, there has been a need to establish scientifically-based research in education (Maxwell, 2004). Scientifically-based research in the field of education has the goal of creating a theory about what works that can be generalized for policymakers and education professionals (Donmoyer, 2014). Feuer, Towne, & Shavelson (2002) state "when a problem is poorly understood and plausible hypotheses are scant qualitative methods... are necessary to describe complex phenomena, generate theoretical models, and reframe questions" (p. 8). Using a qualitative approach, the researcher examines multiple cases to understand a phenomenon, which is used to develop a theory that will benefit the field of education and other leaders.

Employing a qualitative research design enhanced the exploration of the role school leadership takes in the collaborative process between general and special educators in rural school settings. This knowledge will help leaders understand a variety of roles they could employ and how the school leader perceived the effectiveness of the collaboration between general and special educators from the role they took. Analysis of data gave the researcher the opportunity to interpret the role of school leaders in rural schools during collaboration activities between general and special educators in a purposeful convenience sampling. Themes and patterns evolved and a theory was developed based off of participant's experiences (Hayes & Singh, 2012).

Within a qualitative method, an evaluative approach was selected as the most appropriate research procedure because it will allow the researcher to assess leadership roles in collaborative practices already in place. By evaluating current practices, the researcher was exposed to a variety of practices and multiple leadership roles that general and special education teachers use to collaborate. With the demands of state accreditation with accountability systems, the role of the school leader is largely focused on being a strong instructional leader. Given the influence of leaders in schools, studies have shown that effective collaboration is largely a result of characteristics and skills associated with strong leadership. This investigation of the role of a school leader in facilitating effective collaboration between general and special education staff was conducted to understand the various roles school leaders take on during collaborative practices, and the effectiveness of the collaborative practices based on the perceptions of the school leader.

Evaluative methodology requires a researcher to carefully select a research question. Therefore, research questions from the phenomenological tradition that refrain from judgement



but assess the effectiveness of leadership roles in collaboration were selected. These research questions looked to clarify the nature of the investigation regarding how school leaders in small rural geographic regions are facilitating effective collaboration between general and special education staff. Additionally the study looked at how the school leader perceived the effectiveness of their collaboration in a state that requires standards aligned instruction for students with disabilities. This qualitative study investigated the following questions.

### **Research Questions**

#### **Overarching question**

How does the small rural school leader participate in collaborative practices between general and special educators?

#### **Sub questions**

- a. Do the leadership qualities of school leaders in small and rural schools impact the productivity during collaborative opportunities given to general and special educators?
- b. How do school leaders in small rural school districts perceive the effectiveness of collaboration between general and special education teachers?

### **Context**

This study took place in a large rural state located in the North eastern region of the United States. According to the state department of education in 2014, this state had over five hundred school districts serving 1,780,602 students and provided special education services to nearly 270,000 students. For this investigation, the researcher studied 17 school districts on the western side of the state. Combined, these districts provide education to 19,237 students.

**Participants**

Participants in this study were recruited using convenience sampling methods. The researcher is associated with each of the 17 school districts through an education service agency. By utilizing these districts, the researcher was able to establish rapport and gained trust from participants. The researcher first asked division Superintendents to assist the researcher in recruiting participants. Participants were then screened and selected based on specific eligibility criteria because only experienced, certified, school leaders serving as a principal or assistant principal were eligible to participate in this study. There are no age, ethnic, experiences, or educational requirements other than those noted above. The total number of participants recruited was grouped into two categories based on their roles; secondary school administrator, and elementary school administrator. To obtain a typical case for this study, a total of 15 participants will be recruited in hopes of reaching saturation.

**Researcher**

To promote the ideal of trustworthiness, the issue of researcher bias must be addressed. For this proposed study, the researcher is a 36-year-old white male who is working toward a doctoral degree in educational leadership. The researcher has had a twelve year career in education serving as a special education teacher, special education administrator, assistant principal, and Director of Special Education. The researcher holds the belief that school leadership plays a crucial part in the collaborative process to allow students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum. He has experienced negative situations regarding school leader's views on students with disabilities' access to general education. These school leaders have allowed their beliefs and assumptions about students receiving special education services to impact the way in which they provide programs for students with disabilities within

their respective schools. These experiences have led to the belief that school leaders may not have been adequately prepared to lead programs for students with disabilities through pre-service teacher and leadership preparation programs and school level professional development opportunities. However, this researcher also has witnessed situations where school leaders have taken on the responsibility to educate themselves in the regulations governing special education programs in order to effectively provide for these students in their schools' programs.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The researcher used a triangulated methodology with convergence of data from multiple sources to investigate and understand a rural school leader's participation in collaboration (Denzin, 1978). First, the researcher developed an audit trail in an effort to keep a coherence encompassing timeline of research activities. The activities included participant contacts, consent forms, demographic statistics for the participating schools, interview protocols, field notes, memos, coding methods and notations, transcriptions, documents relating to instrument development, and telecommunication records. The audit trail assisted in keeping the researcher organized during the investigation.

The initial inquiry used observation of regular and special education teachers engaged in a collaborative planning session. The observer used an observation checklist to document evidence of effective characteristics of collaboration (Appendix A). Then, using the same observation checklist, the observer continued to document evidence of effective collaborative practices by observing the teachers engaged in instructional delivery.

Next, semi structured interviews were scheduled with the principal of the teachers' observed using an interview guide (Appendix B). Interviews took place once and the interviews were semi structured to allow for participant elaboration and exploration using the interview

protocol as a guide. Utilizing the phenomenological hermeneutic tradition, the questions focused on the meaning or essence of the participants lived experience or knowledge (Hayes & Singh, 2012). The interviews were approximately 45 minutes long and consisted of 12 questions. In order to provide more opportunities for participation, interviews were conducted via tele conferencing when face to face meetings are unable to be scheduled. All interviews were recorded in order to allow for verbatim transcription to be completed by the researcher. Interviewees were asked how they perceive their role in the collaborative practices observed in the teachers.

In addition to the observations and interviews, the researcher reviewed documentation school leaders have implemented that were observed or discussed during the processes. The researcher asked questions about the system for clarification and sought out themes presented among systems created by school leaders to make recommendations to future school leaders creating environments that allow for effective collaboration.

**Data Analysis.** The primary researcher was responsible for compiling information and notes from observation protocols and document review, and transcribing each participant interview through recordings. The researcher identified main themes or issues that became apparent during these phases as well as any discrepancies noted between and within participants. Additionally, the researcher noted interesting or important trends that emerged. Once transcribed, coding occurred using the following steps. After data had been reviewed and collected, the researcher noted and summarized as data collection. The researcher compiled observation protocols and notes taken during documentation review as well as interview transcripts. Throughout this procedure, the researcher read and reviewed transcripts to compare

general comments about the interviews among participants to identify themes. Coding was conclusive once the researcher reached a point of saturation where no other themes emerge.

**Strategies for Trustworthiness**

Several strategies were utilized to increase trustworthiness for the proposed study. These include credibility; transferability; confirmability; and ethical validation. Credibility was evident through the use of an audit trail, memos, and member checking. Transferability was demonstrated through the use of a sample that meets the described criteria. Confirmability has been achieved by the researcher taking on the perspective of epoché to capture the essence of participants without judgement. Additionally, ethical validations were demonstrated by treating all aspects of the proposed research study with fidelity in order to inform school leaders about special education management.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Analysis of Results**

In 2004, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) aligned to language found in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA 2004). This reauthorization required students with disabilities to have access to the same curriculum as their non-disabled peers. This language means that practices in instruction and assessment for students with disabilities must be aligned to the academic content standards established in each state (Parrish & Stodden, 2009). Therefore, the planning, delivery and assessment of instruction for general and special education students would benefit by collaboration between general and special education teachers.

However, the specialty of general and special education teachers is different. Whereas general education teachers are trained in providing instruction in core content areas, special education teachers are trained to provide specially designed instruction to meet the individual learning characteristics of students with disabilities. The alignment of these two acts has caused education professionals across the two disciplines to collaborate in order to refine their teaching practices to meet the needs of all learners, including students with disabilities. The intent of this collaboration is to improve the performance outcomes of all students.

In addition to the accountability alignment, the acts also require that students with disabilities receive their education from a highly qualified teacher in environments with their non-disabled peers. Therefore, general and special education teachers are delivering instruction collaboratively in order to meet these requirements through co-teaching methods. In co-teaching, the specialties of these teachers complement each other in order to meet the diverse needs of students. The intent of this collaboration, then, is to raise the achievement outcomes

of students with disabilities by combining content and instructional design into one seamless system of instruction.

Furthermore, ESEA and IDEIA have increased the school administrators' role in leading instruction. School leaders are now responsible for ensuring that all state and federal policies for accountability are met within their buildings. To meet these needs, leaders are promoting a collaborative planning process among educators (Fullan, 2002; Halverson, Grigg, Pritchett & Thomas, 2007). Instructional leadership has led teachers to expect school leaders to have a thorough understanding of the student population and how it performs compared to similar schools across the district. Additionally, teachers expect school leaders to establish achievement goals that best meet the needs of the school's student population.

The word collaboration has become a commonly used term by educators to describe how they work together in planning for and implementing instruction. However, teachers are often times left to collaborate with little direction and little or no participation from school leaders as the process unfolds. For exchanges between education professionals to positively impact student achievement, it is felt that the role of the school leader is important. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the role of school leadership within the context of teacher collaboration and the factors that contribute to their level of leadership and participation.

The design of this research process focuses on exploring and understanding the role of school leaders in rural public school settings in the collaborative process between general and special educators. The methodology selected involves qualitative research. The researcher subscribed to the social constructivism paradigm believing that universal truths about an administrator's role in collaboration cannot exist because of the multiple perspectives teachers and administrators have about leadership, personality, character, students, and learning (Hayes &

Singh, 2012). Additionally, a phenomenological hermeneutical method where the researcher sought to interpret the meaning of participants' role in collaboration was used (Lindseth & Norbert, 2004). The goal was to interpret how rural school leaders facilitate and participate in collaboration between general and special education staff. To gain as much information as possible during this research, critical incidence data collection techniques were used.

Observations, individual interviews, and a review of notes, reports, and documents that addressed the topic were conducted.

Evaluative methodology requires a researcher to carefully select a research question. Therefore, research questions from the phenomenological hermeneutical method were selected that acknowledges lived experiences have an impact on the research process will assess the effectiveness of leadership roles in collaboration. These research questions sought to clarify the nature of the investigation regarding how school leaders in rural geographic regions are facilitating effective collaboration between general and special education staff, and how the school leader perceived the effectiveness of collaboration in a state that requires standards aligned instruction for all students, including students with disabilities. This qualitative study investigated the following questions.

### **Overarching question**

How does the rural school leader participate in collaborative practices between general and special education teachers?

### **Sub questions**

a. Do the leadership qualities of school leaders in rural schools impact the productivity during collaborative opportunities given to general and special education teachers?



- b. How do school leaders in rural school districts perceive the effectiveness of collaboration between general and special education teachers?

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The researcher used a triangulated methodology with convergence of data from multiple sources to investigate and understand a rural school leader's participation in collaboration (Denzin, 1978). First, the researcher developed an audit trail in an effort to keep a coherence encompassing timeline of research activities. The activities include participant contacts, consent forms, demographic statistics for the participating schools, interview protocols, field notes, memos, coding methods and notations, transcriptions, documents relating to instrument development, and telecommunication records.

The initial inquiry used observation of regular and special education teachers engaged in a collaborative planning session. The observer used an observation checklist (Appendix A) to document evidence of effective characteristics of collaboration. Then, using the same observation checklist, the observer continued to document evidence of effective collaborative practices by observing the teachers engaged in instructional delivery.

Next, semi structured interviews were scheduled with the principal of the teachers' observed using an interview protocol (Appendix B). Interviews took place once and the interviews were semi structured to allow for participant elaboration and exploration using the interview protocol as a guide. Utilizing the phenomenological hermeneutic tradition, the questions focused on the meaning or essence of the participants lived experience or knowledge (Hayes & Singh, 2012). The interviews were approximately 45 minutes long and consisted of 12 questions. In order to provide more opportunities for participation, interviews were conducted

via tele conferencing when face to face meetings were unable to be scheduled. All interviews were recorded in order to allow for verbatim transcription to be completed by the researcher.

### **District Demographic Information**

#### **Collection and Review**

In order to understand the geographical region the study was conducted in, student demographic information was gathered from the state's data collection system used to provide districts federal and local funding. Districts report this information on an annual basis based off of their student population as of December 1 of each academic year. This data is then compiled and a Special Education Data Report is created and made available to the public. Data reported below is for the 2014-2015 school year because the 2015-2016 data was being compiled and not yet available during the course of this study. Regional data is presented followed by district demographic information presented according to its level of participation in this study.

Superintendents from seventeen school districts were approached (Appendix C) to participate in the study. Student enrollment of these school districts ranged from 3,953 to 434 students with a mean enrollment of 1,371.52 students (Pennsylvania State Data Center, 2015). According to the December 1, 2014, child count, the race/ethnicity of the student population ranged from 90.0% to 98.8% students reported as white resulting in an average of 96.14% white students (Pennsylvania State Data Center, 2015). The percent of students receiving special education services ranged from 12.5% to 27.8% with a state average of 15.6% (Pennsylvania State Data Center, 2015). Of the student receiving special education services in the districts, the percentage of students receiving these services inside the regular education classroom 80% or more of the school day ranged from 75.6% to 32.4% with a mean of 61.34% and a state average of 62.0%.

Fourteen superintendents from the seventeen districts responded to the request to participate, or 82.35%. Enrollment data obtained from the state's data collection center for these districts are displayed in Tables 1 through 4. All of the school districts' special education populations consist of students who were identified as one of the state's recognized disability categories as of December 1, 2014, through an eligibility process. The disability categories include:

1. Autism
2. Deaf-Blindness
3. Emotional Disturbance
4. Hearing Impairment Including Deafness
5. Intellectual Disability (Mental Retardation)
6. Multiple Disabilities
7. Orthopedic Impairment
8. Other Health Impairment
9. Specific Learning Disability
10. Speech or Language Impairment
11. Traumatic Brain Injury
12. Visual Impairment Including Blindness

Of the fourteen districts that responded to the request made to participate in the study, seven (50%) reported that they were unable to participate due to not having teachers engaged in co-teaching. The demographics of these districts are displayed in table 1.

*Table 1**School Age Enrollment by Local Education Agency (LEA)*

District	Total Enrollment	Special Education Enrollment	Percent Special Education	State Percent Special Education
LEA 1	552	112	20.3%	15.6%
LEA 2	602	93	15.4%	15.6%
LEA 3	674	139	20.6%	15.6%
LEA 4	814	104	12.8%	15.6%
LEA 5	884	135	15.3%	15.6%
LEA 6	1,050	169	16.1%	15.6%
LEA 7	1,136	170	15.0%	15.6%

The data above represents the seven smallest districts of the seventeen asked to participate in the study. In total, they represent 5,712 students or 26.76% of the total student population in the area of study. Moreover, the districts provide special education services to 922 or 26.36% of the students receiving special education services in the region. Additionally, the geographical location of these districts all fall within the same county.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, this county's population is 38,821. Of that, 18.9% are under the age of 18. Additionally, the median household income in the county between 2009-2013 is \$42,389. Also between 2009-2013, 18.9% of the county lived in poverty. Reasons given for non-participation were that the school district:

1. Did not have any co-teaching classes taking place this year
2. Teachers do not plan and co-teach together

3. Special Education teachers only support general education teachers
4. Co-teaching doesn't really take place.

It is also noted that according to district rosters, only one district employees a special education director or employee dedicated to monitoring the programs designed to educating students with disabilities on a full time basis. The remaining six districts have a staff member responsible for overseeing special education programs as little as 10% of their time up to 80% of the time. On average, these seven districts employ a staff member dedicated to the oversight of special education programs 45.71% of the time. In fact, a principal from one of these districts serves in a dual role of intermediate school Principal as well as the districts' Director of Special Education. The remaining special education supervisors in these districts are contracted through the local education service agency. Therefore, they spend anywhere from one day every other week to four days per week in their assigned district. Their remaining time is dedicated then to other responsibilities outside the district.

Two additional districts expressed interest in participating. The researcher was contacted by an elementary school principal who asked what was meant by collaboration between regular and special education teachers. When the researcher explained that the study would consist of observing the teachers from the two disciplines planning and instructing, the principal reported that did not take place in her building and stated "that is more of a secondary thing". Enrollment data for this district is displayed in Table 2.

*Table 2**School Age Enrollment, LEA 8*

District	Total Enrollment	Special Education Enrollment	Percent Special Education	State Percent Special Education
LEA 8	2,290	399	17.4%	15.6%

Data shows that this particular school district is the second largest of the seventeen districts asked to participate. Furthermore, the special education population exceeds the state special education population rate by 1.8%. This district's population represents 10.73% of the regions total student enrollment and provides special education services to 11.40% of the total population. Additionally, this district employs two full time employees dedicated to overseeing special education programs. The researcher attempted to contact the principal at the high school level in order to schedule time for observation and interviews. However, due to scheduling conflicts and local assessment windows, the school principal declined participation.

The Director of Student Services from LEA 9 also contacted the researcher directly. As part of this employee's job functions, she oversees special education programs across the district. It was reported to the researcher by this employee that within the past five years, the district invested time, effort, and financial resources in training building level leaders in co-teaching practices for students with disabilities. Central administration in this district felt that in order for building level leaders to expect teachers to embark in co-teaching, they had to be knowledgeable in the methodologies and practices essential to its success. However, it was reported that because of the transient nature of this school district's staff, principals have either turned over since training was provided, or the building principal did not buy into the initiative. Therefore,

she was unable to recommend any of her school leaders for participation in the study. For that reason, this district was unable to participate in the study because they did not have any co-teaching situations taking place within the district. The demographic information of this district is listed in Table 3.

*Table 3*

*School Age Enrollment, LEA 9*

District	Total Enrollment	Special Education Enrollment	Percent Special Education	State Percent Special Education
LEA 9	1,975	543	27.5%	15.6%

This district provides services to 9.25% of the region's total student population and services 15.52% of students who qualify for special education services. Data indicates that this district exceeds the state percent of special education students by 11.9%. This district is the fourth largest district in the participant region, has the highest percentage of students receiving special education services, and employs two full time staff members to oversee special education in addition to other student programs such as Title I and Act 89.

The remaining five school districts represent 10,794 students or 50.57% of the population in the region where the study was conducted. Demographic information for these five districts is displayed in table 4.

*Table 4**School Age Enrollment, LEA 10-14*

District	Total Enrollment	Special Education Enrollment	Percent Special Education	State Percent Special Education
LEA 10	3,953	695	17.6%	15.6%
LEA 11	2,087	302	14.5%	15.6%
LEA 12	2,076	327	15.8%	15.6%
LEA 13	1,631	273	16.7%	15.6%
LEA 14	1,047	131	12.5%	15.6%

The demographic data in table 4 shows that the five districts that did participate in the study provide special education services to 1,728 or 49.41% of the students who qualify for special education throughout the region. Additionally, the range of percent special education population is from 12.5% to 17.6% with a mean of 15.42% falling below the stage average of 15.6% by .18%. Three of the five districts have one employee dedicated to overseeing special education programs on a full time basis. LEA 10 employees three people to do this, and LEA 14 has an employee who serves as school psychologist in addition to overseeing special education programs for the district.

Eight principals represented the five districts that participated. To obtain demographic information on the school leader at the school sites within the districts that agreed to participate, surveys were administered (Appendix D). Basic profiles were obtained for all administrators reflecting eight Caucasian principals (100%). The school leaders' ages ranged from 35 to 49 years old with a mean age of 42.12. Years of experience in education ranged from thirteen to twenty-eight years with an average of 19.12 years in education. Years of administrative



experience ranged from three to eighteen with an average of 8.81 total years serving as an administrator. Additionally, all participants had earned a master's degree and held the state's credentials to serve as an administrator. Additionally three participants were credentialed by this state to be a supervisor of special education, or 37.50%.

### **Data from Observation**

#### **Collection and Review**

The eight participating school leaders and the researcher met briefly prior to each observation to discuss the data collection procedures. The researcher observed teachers engaged in collaborative activities for at least thirty minutes and also had an opportunity to talk with each teaching professional about their common planning opportunities. During these discussions, every teaching team reported to the researcher that they do not have time during their day devoted to planning for shared instruction. Therefore, the observer watched teacher teams delivering instruction to students with and without disabilities in a regular education setting where co-teaching was identified by the school leader to have been taking place. The researcher documented characteristics of effective collaboration seen between regular and special education teachers during each 30 minute observation. Overall, eighteen regular and special education staff members' interactions were observed. Using an observation checklist (Appendix A), the characteristics of effective collaboration the observer looked for were:

1. Communication of Student Information
2. Relating student information to data
3. Displays of curriculum knowledge
4. Admittance of personal strengths/weaknesses
5. Use of experience to problem solve

6. Displays a positive attitude
7. Shows professional responsibility
8. Committed to students
9. Respects colleagues
10. Has a defined role
11. Effective interpersonal skills
12. Knowledge of educational environments
13. Able to provide solutions to problems
14. Solutions are prioritized during activity
15. Values differences of opinion
16. Displays knowledge of practices in differentiation
17. Has the resources available for outcomes
18. Plans for dissemination of information

As previously mentioned, upon arrival at all eight schools, the teachers reported to the researcher that they did not have dedicated time throughout their day to plan for co-teaching. Teachers from one LEA asked the researcher directly, “What would you want to see, because we don’t do this together”. Another set of teachers noted “we co-plan on the fly, like at lunch”. A third set of teachers shared that the “lead teacher does the planning”. Therefore, the eighteen teaching staff members observed were in eight general education classroom environments delivering instruction. Table 5 shows the characteristic of effective collaboration that were displayed by frequency across the eight teaching teams.

Table 5

*Display of Characteristics of Effective Collaboration*

Characteristic	Displayed	Not Displayed
Communicated student information	0	18
Related student information to data	0	18
Displays of curriculum knowledge	13	5
Admittance of personal strengths/weaknesses	0	18
Use of experience to problem solve	0	18
Displayed a positive attitude	17	1
Showed professional responsibility	7	11
Committed to students	17	1
Respects Colleagues	18	0
Had a defined role	17	1
Effective Interpersonal Skills	16	2
Knowledge of educational environments	0	0
Able to Provide Solutions to Problems	0	0
Solutions are prioritized during activity	0	0
Valued Differences of Opinion	0	0
Displays knowledge of practices in differentiation	4	14

*Display of Characteristics of Effective Collaboration*

Had the Resources Available for Outcomes	1	17
Plans for dissemination of information	0	0
Totals	110	124

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The most frequent characteristic displayed through observation was respect toward colleagues. This characteristic was observed in 18 out of 18 (100%) of trials. Following respect toward colleagues was displays of positive attitude, commitment to students, and serving in a defined role 17 out of 18, or 94.44% of the observations. Furthermore, the defined role observed 17 out of 18 times (94.44%) was the general education teacher serving as the lead teacher and the special education professional as supporting students during instruction. The next most frequent characteristic of collaboration observed was the use of effective interpersonal skills in 16 out of 18 (88.88%) observations followed by displays of curriculum knowledge in 13 out of 18 or 72.22% of the time. Displays of professional responsibility occurred in 7 (38.88%) observations, practices in differentiated instruction occurred in 4 (22.22%) observations, and evidence of resources available for learning was seen in 1 (5.56%) observation. The following characteristics of effective collaboration were not displayed during observation:

1. Communication of Student Information
2. Relating student information to data
3. Admittance of personal strengths/weaknesses
4. Use of experience to problem solve
5. Knowledge of educational environments

6. Ability to provide solutions to problems
7. Prioritizing problems that have been identified
8. Valuing difference of opinion
9. Planning for dissemination of information

This results in 9 out of 18 (50%) of the characteristics identified as having an impact on the effectiveness of collaborative between regular and special education teachers were not observed across 18 educational staff members. Upon consideration of these characteristics, each one represents an activity that would be observed as a collaborative activity that takes place during common planning. By not having time dedicated to common planning, collaboration is impacted. This impact is due to teachers not having opportunity to communicate student information, share experiences, discuss personal strengths and weaknesses pertaining to instruction and problem solve together.

### **Data from Interviews**

The eight school leaders completed surveys to provide the number of years served as administrators, their educational backgrounds, gender, age, and ethnicity. The school leaders' ages ranged from 35 to 49 years old with a mean age of 42.12 years old. Years of experience in education ranged from thirteen to twenty-eight years with an average of 19.12 years. Years of administrative experience ranged from three to eighteen with an average of 8.81 total years. All participants in this study have earned a master's degree and hold the held the state's credentials to serve as an administrator. Additionally three participants were credentialed by this state to be a supervisor of special education, of 37.50%. All school leaders that participated in the study were Caucasian.

The participating school leader met briefly with the researcher prior to each observation experience to discuss data collection procedures. Following observation and data collection, the researcher returned to the school office or scheduled phone conferences with participants to conduct interviews with the school leader. Leaders were asked questions during the interview aimed to solicit discussion about the classroom activities observed related to the research questions. During the interview, notes were taken by the researcher and referenced during the interview to confirm, expand, or seek clarification about statements made during the interview. The notes were also able to be used to probe the school leader during the interview. By observing teachers prior to the interview, administrators could be provided with specific instances as points of reference during the interview. Audio recordings were made during each interview. The researcher transcribed over the next several weeks. Transcribed interview responses were read and reread to identify patterns of response in the school leaders' role in collaboration between regular and special education teachers that fit into thematically categories.

Interview responses from the eight individual participants reflect each school leader's view of their role during collaborative processes. A compilation of these perspectives has been sorted and categorized to present a comprehensive account of administrators' role in collaboration between regular and special education. Data gathered through observations of teachers and interviews with school leaders were analyzed to determine administrators' impressions of the role they serve in collaboration between regular and special education teachers. Six overarching themes were present in interview questions. The thematic categories that emerged were: meaning of collaboration, school leader training, products and/or procedures used, support and feedback to teachers, meaning to teachers, principal's perception. Some of the repeated concepts were placed into combined data sets. Data compiled as school leader training

was combined with products and/or procedures used to monitor collaboration. Additionally, data collected meaningfulness to teachers and self-rating of involvement in collaboration were combined. Therefore, four basic themed categories were discussed during data collection: 1) meaning of collaboration, 2) training received and procedures implemented for collaboration, 3) support and feedback provided on collaborative efforts, and 4) perceptions of collaboration.

The themes emerged by implementing an organizing system for prioritizing information (Miller & Crabtree, 1994). First, was tabulating the frequency the researcher observed characteristics of effective collaboration and the number of times the school leader mentioned one of these characteristics during the interview. By pulling meaning from these codes, the researcher was able to reflect on the literal responses given by participants. Then, the researcher pulled meaning from the responses and categorized them initially into six themes. The six themes were then put into three categories: planning, instructing, and personal characteristics. Finally, the frequency in each category were interpreted and reduced into the four basic themes mentioned above.

### **Findings**

Collaboration between regular and special education teachers is a way that school leaders can respond to requirements stated in the ESEA and IDEIA to ensure students with disabilities receive instruction aligned to state education standards. Often times, this collaboration occurs in the form of co-teaching. Co-teaching and other collaborative activities involve multiple characteristics in order for teachers to be effective in their practice of educating all students. The study sought perceptions of principals about their role in the collaboration that takes place between these two disciplines as well as the impact their involvement has on the process. To gather information from principals about their role in collaborative processes, interview

questions were divided into five categories: meaning of collaboration; principal training; procedures and processes to promote collaboration; teacher roles and responsibilities; and support/feedback.

Although participants definition of collaboration, the training they have received, processes and procedures they have established, requirements they make of teachers, and the support and feedback they provide varied, overall many characteristics required for collaboration to be successful were not present or understood by school administrators. The following data represents participants' responses given during the interview phase.

### **Meaning of Collaboration**

The first category asked principals to reflect on what the meaning of the word collaboration between regular and special education means and the characteristics needed for its success. Every administrator that served as a participant identified that collaboration requires time for the regular and special education to plan together and the ability for the team to define each other's role in the partnership. Ava stated:

“Well, first thing is common planning time. Not just in the hall “hey how is Jimmy doing?” actually sitting down and meeting each week to plan the lesson especially if it’s a push in, or inclusion. And not one teach the regular ed. teacher doing all the teaching, I like to see the other one doing some... switching roles, and making it their classroom. So, that’s for inclusion but if it’s a pull out, I still think it is very important for them to touch base with the teachers even though they are not teaching them that subject area, per se, the homeroom teacher. But to just check on you know how is everything going, are you seeing progress? You know, do you think it’s time that we maybe pull/push them in a little bit for reading.”



Matt defined collaboration between regular and special education by saying:

“I think we have a great example of this working at our high school is that ah we have our regular ed and our ah special education teacher team teaching together. And what do I mean by team teaching? If our special education teacher has something to add to the presentation or whatnot they free to chime in or add to that at any time. They are not in there just as a supplementary role; they take an active role in instruction in the classroom. I think you have to be open minded, you have to realize what the limitations are that the kids have and the expectation levels. I also think you have to be on the same page as far as what is it that you are trying to accomplish in regard to content, is it social skills, is it both, is it just that exposure to the regular ed setting? As far as pulling them out of the special ed classes and having them in there. What’s the purpose? I think if everybody is on the same page with that it’s going to benefit the student greatly.”

Sophia stated that collaboration is:

“Collaboration between special education and the regular education teacher would mean working together to ensure that we are meeting the needs of every child in the classroom. It would look like, common planning time, it would look like, shared data analysis where both the regular education teacher and the learning support teacher are looking at data collectively, reviewing that data, setting goals together and not only setting the goals but working to achieve them. Providing supports together. I feel that from my experiences a regular education teacher has expertise in a particular subject or content area; the special education teacher, their expertise is in providing the accommodations, modification, adaptations to ensure that we are meeting the needs of our students.”

The definitions given by these school principals identify that collaboration involves common planning time to prepare for instruction where teachers should analyze student and classroom data, set goals for students, and plan for instructional responsibility.

When asked expand on what was meant by collaborative planning time, participant's answers varied. Gianna reported that at her school, "They have about 25 minutes at the end of the day which is technical but it's better than nothing. But it's not common plan time that is scheduled throughout their day." Ava told the researcher:

"To me it (collaboration) means having time together where whether it be face-to-face or with online tools where you're thinking about, you're analyzing the data of the students in you're coming up with a plan for how you are going to meet the needs of the students particularly when it's involving an inclusion situation. You're going to figure out who is going to be teaching what, who is going to be planning what, it really should be you're doing the entire process together beginning to end starting with the data analysis all the way through to the end assessments. You're planning every step of the way from the units that you are teaching and the specific lessons. What the students that have special needs may need beforehand, maybe there's going to be some pre-teaching before that situation in that inclusion classroom and how they will be supported while they are in there. And what follow-up would be required afterward and just continuing that process on and on. I think too it's important to for them to have time to pull the dynamics in that inclusion classroom depending on what type of co-teaching they are going to use if they are using parallel teaching, if they are using team teaching how they're going to split up the class. For example, you know maybe that maybe there some regular education students would benefit from a small group of a parallel teach that you know maybe the

regular/special ed. teacher is going to teach like who is going to do what and all of that requires collaboration and I believe that is how you achieve all that, so it is working together to kind of achieve those. However, that's the biggest struggle is that they don't have that common time.”

This particular principal acknowledges what should go into common planning time for teaching teams to effectively collaborate. They identified that teachers should analyze data together to plan for how to deliver and assess instruction to diverse learners as well as to determine what roles to function in to do this. However, this participant further admitted that her teachers do not have this time in their schedule to be able to do this.

In regard to the data analysis, this principal submitted a universal screening tool that is used as the primary basis for data meetings where general and special education teachers have the opportunity to co-teach. The data tool screened students starting in Kindergarten three times a year to monitor progress. The particular tool reviewed aligned to the states adopted standards. However, it is noted that the tool screens as compared to the state’s standards, not the particular district’s curriculum. Karen defined common planning time as:

“Data meetings where we meet about once a month as a grade level and the learning support teachers come to that for their grade level and we talk about kids, and just data and different things that we do. That would be the time that we may bring up, you know Johnny just came into my learning support classroom...he just seems really down. Is that typical of him? Just time talking to the other teachers.”

Sophia stated:

“We have team meetings every day after school and on Mondays they have like their grade level department meetings and that's where the common planning really comes into

place. Um the department meetings occur on Mondays and then Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday it's their choice of what the topic of the day is. However, I set the topics. So one day, they are to discuss and share best practices, one day is for data analysis, then we have a day for student concerns to ensure that we are meeting their needs kind of like a self-assessment, and then there is one day for parent communication. So that's what we do every single day for each week."

Conversations surrounding what common planning time means to these two principals provided different definitions. These principals view common planning time as data meetings, time at the end of the day that isn't devoted to team planning, team meetings and department meetings. Furthermore, one principal said that she gives time every day for common planning, however the topics are set by her. No principal identified that they give co-teachers the opportunity to strictly sit and plans for the instruction and assessment of students together.

During observation sessions, 7 out of 8 times the researcher noted that the roles of the classroom teachers were that of the general education teacher serving as the primary facilitator and the special education staff member supported their instruction. When their principals were asked about the roles each teacher takes in the classroom, responses did not appear to place the value of each professional's specialty on equal playing fields. Jonathan stated that he could "put an aide in the classroom and it would be a lot cheaper and I would probably get better results." Additionally, Jonathan stated that: "special education teachers are trained as consultants to the regular ed. teachers." Dominic shared, "I think other teachers (general education) still hold the rule that I'm the sole person in this room, and this (special ed. teacher) is the person that is here to help."

These statements suggest the principals, as instructional leaders, have not established a culture of shared responsibility of student achievement within the school setting. The perceptions of all teachers should promote shared responsibility for learning in an effective collaborative environment. Matt stated that:

“If our special education teacher has something to add to the presentation or whatnot they are free to chime in or add to that at any time. They are not in there just as a supplementary role; they take an active role in instruction in the classroom.”

This statement shows that the school leader understands that special education professionals are not present to just support the teacher, but sees their input as minimal to the delivery of instruction.

The second question in this category took the definition of collaboration and focused on the specific characteristics needed to make collaboration between the two disciplines successful. Of the 18 characteristics looked-for during observations, administrators identified 9 out of the 18 items, or 50%, that were listed on the observation checklist. These items include communicating student information, relating student information to data, displays of curriculum knowledge, admittance of personal strengths/weaknesses, use of experience to problem solve, displays a positive attitude, has a defined role, effective interpersonal skills, and having the resources available for outcomes. Of these, four are noted to have not been seen during observation. These include, communication of student information, relating student information to data, admittance of personal strengths/weaknesses, use of experience to problem solve. This suggests that although principals note the importance of these things, they do not ensure that educators are doing them. Sophia shared that collaboration takes “a willingness of everybody involved” while Jonathan stated: “there has to be an openness between both teachers to develop relationships that

allow work to happen. You can't be set in stone on only one way to get something."

Additionally, Ava said:

"Well, number one is they communicating with one another. That is probably the first thing I would look at. Do they rely on each other equally? Do they both look for support with the other; do they have their own defined roles about who is taking over what? Ultimately they have to decide who is going to do this or that."

Sara felt the characteristics for successful collaboration were:

"I think the team members have to be open at discussing the strengths and weakness that each person can bring to the table. And then, be willing to recognize the strengths and weaknesses and build upon them. For instance, if a teacher is very strong in math, understanding that you are not proficient in everything so take that person's strength and make them the lead for that instead of always being a lead for every subject. Experience is built upon each other's experiences. Their experiences and what they can bring to the table is vastly different. It is also recognizing personality like communication skills, personality types (type A, type B) as well as being open to recognizing that your way is not always the best for every student."

Matt stated:

"I think you have to be open minded. You have to realize what the limitations are that the kids have and the expectation levels. I also think you have to be on the same page as far as what it is that you are trying to accomplish in regard to content. I think if everybody is on the same page with that, it's going to benefit the student greatly."

These responses all express the importance of team members to communicate openly with one other. Principals feel that teachers need to be able to identify their own weaknesses and

strengths and communicate them with each other. Additionally, teachers need to identify and take advantage of their interdependence on one another. Sophia shared:

“I think that it's unique for the individuals. I've seen collaboration work in differently ways. I've seen it where they are both actually sitting down and planning lessons together, I've seen it where they are taking a classroom and determining what the needs of the students are and having actual centers where they are having even two lessons going on depending on the needs of the student. I've also seen and I don't know that it's the most effective but it can be effective at times where one of the teachers would be the main facilitator of the lesson where the other teacher is just providing the support.”

This principal recognizes that teachers need to be flexible in how they work together based on not only their individuality, but as student need as well.

A third characteristic identified by school leaders that impacts the effectiveness of collaboration is related to knowledge of the districts' curriculum. During observations, 72% of the teachers observed displayed knowledge of the curriculum in English/Language Arts and Math subject areas. Both the regular and special education teacher provided student's standards signed instruction and support using appropriate instructional resources that followed the scope and sequence provided to them by district administrators. Principals identified that having this content knowledge was a key factor in what it means to collaborate for instructional means. Even in secondary settings where content was specific to a teaching discipline such as English, both teachers were able to teach students the required learning targets toward meeting curriculum expectations. Ava states:

“It (co-teaching) met a lot of resistance particularly with the math, Algebra I, I had a special education teacher who really didn't feel comfortable teaching Algebra I. So that

first year, it was a lot of her learning the content and she would be in there for the first part of the lesson and she would take some of the kids for the second part and do some re-teaching or some parallel teaching during that time. Now the second year that was much smoother because she had an understanding of how to teach that Algebra I and then they were able to do more of what I call team teaching. But it took two years to get to that it didn't happen the first year just because she was able to offer support for accommodations and modifications when needed, but she really she had to almost learn it with the kids and then and then try to deliver it.”

Matt said:

“I think it has to do with the teachers that are in there and has a lot to do with how they are treated as individuals and it's just the teachers are generally warm in that they're caring and interested - it shows with the kids. They know their content and those sorts of things. They are very proficient.”

Sophia shared:

“I'm getting feedback from the emotional support teacher saying I could never give these kids the experience they are getting from the regular ed. teacher because when you're in an emotional support classroom, your resources are limited, space is limited, you have six, seventh, and eighth grade all in one room, so your curriculum is limited. There are a lot of restraints so now that we are able to push some of these teachers out and they are able to see some of the benefits and see some of the support. I think that the more success that we can generate from that, the more buy in I'm going to have in the future. I know it's not something that I'm going to do over night. Even on one school year alone, it's going to take some time and I already have some plans in place for scheduling that



will being in January that we are going to schedule all of these students into regular ed classes. If they need to be pulled out, then that's fine, but they're going to have a place, they are going to be on a roll, they are going to belong.”

These statements suggest that teachers sometime resist entering into co-teaching relationships because they are not familiar with the content they are assigned to teach. However, that teacher must be proficient individually in order to co-teaching and collaboration to be successful. This is seen by both general and special education teachers. Additionally, these principals acknowledge that in order to gain proficiency with content teachers must be given time to acquire the knowledge in the subject they are teaching over the course of several years.

Additionally, personal characteristics and positive relationships, or good interpersonal skills, were noted in 39 out of 89 (43.82%) interview responses in defining characteristics of collaboration from the school leaders perspective. School leaders commented that for collaboration to succeed, teachers needed to serve in a defined role, communicate with each other, maintain positive relationships, and display good personal characteristics. These characteristics were displayed in teachers during observations in the form of displaying a positive attitude toward each other, showing professional responsibility, being committed to student learning, respecting colleagues, serving in a defined role, and displaying effective interpersonal skills. These things occurred across observation 92 out of 110 times, or 83.63% of the total characteristics displayed. Sara shared “It’s recognizing personality. Communication skills, personality types, as well as being opened to recognizing that your way is not always the best way to do things for every student.” Dominic, a principal at the high school level, stated “There has to be an openness between both teachers to develop relationships that allow work to happen. You can’t be set in stone on only one way to get something.” Jonathan said that at the

middle school level, “For collaboration to be successful you have to have communication and a platform for communication. A platform meaning a venue, or a structure that allows for communication and a willingness of everybody involved.”

Ava, an elementary principal noted:

“You have to have a good personality mix and I hate to throw that in there because we are all professionals and this is a profession. But if they (teachers) don’t have that comfort level, trust level, it makes that dynamic more difficult. Not that it can’t work but it doesn’t ever seem to work as well. If they have a good dynamic together and as they get more knowledge they will move more towards team teaching. It is like a natural progression where that doesn’t happen as naturally if they don’t have that comfort together.”

These responses continue to emphasize that communication between professionals must occur. However, it is further stated that the communication is important here in order to build a relationship between teachers. Furthermore, it is acknowledged by these school leaders that the teachers must be willing to openly communicate with each other and opened to the idea of building relationships with one another.

### **Principal Training**

In order to gain an understanding of the school leaders’ level of knowledge surrounding collaboration between regular and special education, the building level administrator was asked how they were trained on collaboration between regular and special education professionals. In this category of questions, participants were asked about trainings they have received from their school division pertaining to collaboration between regular and special education staff and who provided them the trainings. Most frequently, school administrators received training through the

combination of self-sought professional development, experience, research/reading, and coursework and/or trial and error. These self-motivated trainings occurred in 17 out of 28 (60.71%) of responses. 25% of responses indicated that school leaders have received training at a local level either through training provided by their school district or by the local education service agency. All eight school leaders identified having not received any training by their current school district. Jonathan said, “I haven’t had anything directly aside from training that I’ve provided to others. I haven’t received it on my own.” When asked how this principal picked up the knowledge, then, he shared that it was “through research and practice and trial and error.” Matt shared “we work well together within the district, but I don't know that I’d call it necessarily training.” Ava shared, “I would have to say I don’t know that it’s so much the training districts have offered me as much as it’s the professional development I have chosen to seek out.”

Overwhelmingly, faculty members serving in the role of principal that participated in this study have not received training from their current district in the area of general and special education working together. This suggests that districts in this small rural area have not yet developed a district wide culture to address the regulatory language in the federal IDEIA and ESSA acts.

Two of the eight participants identified having received training on these practices in a previous district, while three others were trained through past personal experiences and trial and error. Only one participant, Sophia, identified having formal training throughout her career. She identified received training on this type of collaboration through four different experiences.

Sophia said:

“We went and observed at (LEA Name) high school and really it was an initiative that I felt passionate about and I wanted to ensure that we were meeting the needs of our students and that I was being an effective administrative leader so I took it upon myself to research, read books about co-teaching and of courses I had courses within my undergrad as well as my masters’ degree in special education and even in a Superintendent licensure program. We did a lot with special education laws and I think it has just been a continuous process. I completed five years at the national institute of school leadership so I think that that has helped to establish the background as well. And I think that when it starts at the top and the teachers know that it’s important to me, then it’s important to them.”

Karen noted being trained in another state. She shared:

“From here, no but definitely in (name of State) I had that. We had inclusion in my schools there which when I came back here, I came back when (employee name) did pretty much, there was no inclusion. They didn't even know what it was here. So we actually began that process thirteen years ago.”

Sara received training in another district. She said:

“As a former special ed. teacher I had it through (LEA name). I was a co-teacher at the middle school level and so we participated in monthly collaborations. We were on a corrective action phase with the state. As an administrator here, we kind of built upon our experiences. We provided the trainings of the regular ed and the special ed. teachers, co-teaching trainings as well as we've sent a lot of our staff to (state training agency) and the (local service agency) for training to bring back to the team. In (current LEA name) we have had to kind of build it from the ground up. When I came seven and a half years

ago, we did not have any co-teaching whatsoever. We were pulling out for direct instruction and our special ed numbers were really high and our (special ed.) kids were showing minimal growth. So we had to kind of restructure everything from the way that we identify students, to the way we provide intervention, to the way we look at data to the way we structure the classes.”

What became visible from these comments was that the instructional leaders in the school had received no training from their district on the expectations for regular and special education teachers in co-teaching. The school leaders gained their knowledge either through past experiences, personal research or self-sought professional development provided through education service agencies, training institutes, or colleges/universities. Additionally, many of the school leaders who participated were responsible for beginning co-teaching initiatives not only at the school level, but also within their respective school districts.

### **Procedures and Processes to Promote Collaboration**

The next category of interview questions asked were focused on the processes and procedures school leaders put into place to monitor collaboration among teachers. During the interview, school leaders were asked what types of procedures relating to collaboration their LEA has in place. Department and other forms of team meetings were identified most as the procedure used by school leadership to support collaboration. Additionally, the school leaders identified these meetings as opportunities for common planning time between the two disciplines to occur. Next, much of the data collected from interviews shows the building level leader relies on teachers to hold themselves accountable for collaborating together without expecting any products or having other procedures in place. Gianna stated “We have a common lesson plan template that is K-12, department meetings, and notes from PLC meetings, it’s not common plan

time but we keep a record of all we've done." This administrator then explained that the lesson plan template does not denote any elements that pertain to collaboration between teachers such as the delineation of responsibilities between the two teachers.

Although lesson plans were noted as a procedure used by school leaders to monitor collaboration, only one principal was able to submit a template used by teachers to the researcher. Upon review of the template, it is noted that lesson plans are not required to reflect any characteristics identified as effective to the collaborative process (i.e. role, dissemination of information, student data). No other school leader required a specific format for lesson plans that documents the two disciplines working together and sharing instructional responsibilities, but instead left it to what worked best for the teachers.

Overwhelmingly during conversation surrounding this category of questioning, administrators stated that time together to collaborate was needed in order the co-teaching to be successful. This single factor was noted 19 out of 89 times during interviews, and was the highest data point identified by administrators before data bits were combined. However, it is also noted that the characteristics pertaining to planning and preparation of instruction were observed in only 5 out of 110 data bits during teacher observation. This accounted for only 4.54% of the total number of characteristics displayed by teacher teams. Dominic said: "I think the biggest characteristic is the ability to have time to get together and work on things. Time is the biggest issue." Gianna said: "I have some ideas to try to get more common time for them (high school teachers) because that's the biggest struggle. They don't have that common time." Ava said, "Their biggest barrier is that they don't have time together."

Jonathan shared a procedural manual that was developed in order to support collaboration. The procedural manual submitted to the researcher outlined the processes and

roles professionals should assume to implement special education programs. The manual first defined the role of each professional who works with students who receive special education services. The role of the general education teacher is defined as the professional that provides the instruction. Special educators are there to provide intervention and support to students. Then, it provided step by step procedures for special education teachers to follow that ensure compliance with the states' special education regulations.

These responses indicate to the researcher that many of the principals that participated in the study acknowledge that in order for products and procedures to be required of teachers to document collaboration, time together needs to be provided. These principals acknowledge that providing that time is the biggest barrier to this from happening.

### **Teacher Roles and Responsibilities**

Next, questions were asked to the school leader about the roles and responsibilities they assigned to teachers in order to ensure collaboration occurs. This category of questioning is teacher roles and responsibilities. School leaders were asked what job responsibilities they assign teachers that document that collaboration is occurring. Additionally, they were asked what systems they had in place to help teachers manage these responsibilities. School leaders stated 20 out of 33, or 60.60% of the time that they hold teachers accountable for collaboration through lesson plans, department/team meetings, common planning times, presentations to staff, or through procedural manuals. Interestingly, 24.24% (6 out of 33) responses were that there is no accountability to the principal for teachers to be held accountable to collaborating together. Sara stated "We frequently figure that's in their best interest and that it is kind of expected of them professionally." Sara continued and shared, "I just assume that they are one unit as a team." Karen shared:

“I don’t. And I don’t do that for the regular education teachers either. A lot of schools ask you to turn in your lesson plans for the week, I’ve never ever, ever done that.

Because once again, I trust them. If they are not doing it, I will find out, or they will become an issue of some sort. I know if they are teaching or not. The parents will let me know too.”

Responses in this category produced negative results. Principals in this study do not indicate to teachers who are co-teaching any responsibility to document that collaboration is happening within the classroom or through planning. Responses from this category and that products and procedures category indicate that school leaders have no monitoring systems in place to track the implementation of a co-teaching initiative.

### **Support and Feedback**

The last category of questioning that participants were asked related to the support and feedback they provided to teachers on their collaborative efforts. There were four questions in this category. The first two questions pertained to the support given to teachers. Principals were asked how they support general and special education teachers in working together and how those actions were meaningful to teachers who were providing instruction to students. The second two questions focused on providing feedback. School leaders were asked in what ways they provide feedback to teachers on their collaborative efforts and how they would rate themselves as a leader of collaboration between general and special education teachers in their school. Support and feedback was provided to teachers in multiple ways. Most commonly, though, administrators show support and provide feedback to teachers through performance evaluations and direct conversation. This was noted in 13 out of 31 responses by administrators for a total of 41.93% of the time. The next most frequent way administrators provide support



and feedback to teachers is by directly participating in department or team meetings. This was reported in 6 out of 31 (19.35%) responses. Sara stated, “I don’t really recognize the collaborative efforts.” Matt shared, “A lot of times feedback is what the special ed. director is documenting. But I try to get around the building as much as I can and I pop into those classes and see how the kids are doing just because I enjoy the kids.” Ava said, “I’m always praising my inclusion teacher who works with the learning support teachers. Learning support teachers, I find, are my calm ones. I don’t know if it’s because they have that personality where they are flexible! They can work with just about anyone.” Karen stated:

“My door is always opened. They’ll call me, they’ll just come in and sit down, I go out to visit rooms and if I walk in their rooms, they’ll just ask me questions. It gets me to them. I’m always constantly available to them. They (teachers) like me to be out there and be in the know. That’s where I’m happiest too. My strength is knowing kids and this is my job.”

Sophia said:

“A lot of it is just through conversations. Now of course, when I observe and evaluate the regular ed. teachers, they would receive formal feedback. We use (software name) and through that we of course do the pre-conferences and the post-conferences. I do not officially evaluate the special education staff, that feedback is a little more informal just meetings, sitting down like this, talking with them in the hallway and sometimes, often times, I get feedback from the regular ed. teachers coming to me saying how much they appreciate the support that is provided by the learning support teacher and what a difference they have made. I think that the regular ed. teacher were very intimidate by having some of the emotional support students come into their classroom, or the autistic

support come in. Just feeling a sense of “oh my gosh, I’ve never had students like this”. I don’t know how to teach them but by having a learning support teacher and the emotional support teacher in the classroom, even though the class is large. They are really doing great things! So then I'm getting feedback from the emotional support teacher saying I could never do you know I could never give these kids the experience they are getting from the regular ed. teacher because when you're in an emotional support classroom, your resources are limited, space is limited, you have six, seventh, and eighth grade all in one room, so your curriculum is limited it really there is a lot of restraints so now that we are able to push some of these teachers out and they are able to see some of the benefits and see some of the support. I think that the more success that we can generate from that, the more buy in I'm going to have in the future. I know it's not something that I'm going to do over night.”

The two software programs referenced as management tools to provide teachers feedback on collaboration were reviewed by the researcher. Each of these programs served as a platform for the districts implementation of the state’s educator effectiveness performance evaluation system. The software programs served as a place for administrators to document classroom observations, educator evaluations, and anecdotal notes pertaining to the evaluation model that the state has adopted. The two platforms reviewed both provided the same function, but were produced by different vendors. Neither program addressed collaboration specifically, but referred to working with other staff members under an overarching professional responsibility domain.

These responses suggest that principal in this study offer support and feedback on collaboration ranging from being available to them, engaging them in conversation, and not

providing them feedback at all. It also was noted through these conversations that half of the school leaders who participated in this study shared the statement above that they are not responsible for the overall evaluation of special education staff. Each of these principals shared that these evaluations fall under the job function of the district's Director of Special Education. This can present difficulty to the instructional leader of the school in that they do not have total control over all teachers within their environment.

School administrators were then asked how meaningful they felt teachers found their efforts in leading collaboration between disciplines. The most common response was that teachers love the systems in place in order for them to collaborate with each other. However, multiple benefits were identified across participants including the response of not knowing their staff enough to judge their perception. Ava shared:

"I absolutely do feel that they find that valuable and I would be comfortable with you asking them if they do. Are they getting things out of that, the PLCs (professional learning communities), do they feel like the professional development we're doing is benefiting their instruction? All of these things I felt pretty confident."

Sophia said:

"They love it because it's really what they want to do and I did have them make a connection to educator effectiveness where they would pick a component within the domain that they are striving to grow in so there's that connection. And, they love it because it's what they want to do and they have that time where they can focus on their needs and how they can grow as a professional rather than trying to fit a one size fits all molds. I think both at the high school level and the middle school level that the teachers meet with resistance initially because they don't understand. And they see that divide as

these are my kids, these are your kids. So it's about changing that perception and building awareness and creating that sense of urgency. And I think that when you take the time to sit down and have a conversation or even just have a faculty meeting to explain this is why we are asking you to tech these kids, that these kids are our kids."

Although teachers are not provided time together to explicitly plan for shared instruction, these principals share that they feel teachers find team and department meetings and professional learning communities beneficial to improving teaching practices and support individual growth. However, Gianna stated:

"I'm not sure about the middle/high school teachers. I think that it's just too new for me to really have a handle on their perceptions. I'm not sure. I think that they're getting used to the idea of what all this is. I think they were used to maybe very simple, hands-off just kind of let them do what they do approach and so it is a little bit more of a hands-on approach in the fact that there is some guidance and there is some information coming in and so I think that's gonna take a little bit of time just to be comfortable with that."

Matt, a high school principal shared:

"I think it depends on what teacher you are talking about. I'm just going to say that. And I think that some teachers really buy in and work well together, then I think other teachers still kind of hold the rule that I'm the sole person in this room, and this is the person that is here to help."

These statements show teachers value the support of the school leader differently, depending not only on how active of a role this school leader takes in the role of the teacher but also the role that other professionals have within each other's classrooms. These statements

suggest that with more shared responsibility and a more hands on approach from administrators, teachers are more receptive to collaborative efforts.

Lastly, the principals were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the most, how involved they were in leading collaboration between regular and special education teachers in their schools. Overall, the principals interviewed through this study rated themselves an average of 2.75. They felt that this involvement was meaningful to teachers in multiple ways. The most common pertained to the effectiveness of the teacher him/herself. This was cited in responses of benefiting their instruction, positive impacts to the functions of a special education department, professional growth, broadening the acceptance of learners, and in changing teacher perceptions. These responses were given in 6 out of 16, or 37.50% of administrator responses. Next, 3 out of 16 (18.75%) of responses were that the leaders participation in the collaborative process impacted teacher relationships with students through shared ownership of teaching responsibilities and student relationships. Karen shared, "Probably a four because I don't sit with them when they do collaborate to see it. I trust them. If I did that, I'd say a five but I don't." Matt said, "I would say probably a two. The reason I say that is because I put it on them a little more so than I put it on myself." Ava, an elementary principal said:

"I probably haven't been as involved, I would like to be more involved with special education teacher being directly a part of that even more so than they are now. But you have to start somewhere. We started in small groups and then we fill it out to the big, we try to do it systematically over time so I guess I feel like in a couple years it will be a lot better. I really do. It's just a matter of getting an understanding and awareness of what is this and I truly believe, too. They need training on co-teaching. They really haven't had

that. We're just getting the basics of the curriculum but I don't they don't haven't been trained on what does team teaching look like."

Sara, an elementary principal said:

"I would say it's probably a one and a half because of my involvement in the data meeting and the student assistance meetings. The first two years of implementing that it was a probably five plus. I mean I was really micromanaging everybody and really explaining how to do different strategies and what the expectation was."

Matt said:

"I really don't. I mean I'm involved to lead and sort of support what they do scheduling and all. I'm normally always involved in the scheduling process so as far as me having to be involved in that regard. But I'm on there to support them in any way that they need supported for sure."

The principals largely responded that they would like to provide more time and effort to leaving collaboration within their school. Many noted that they desired to be a bigger part of the process by sitting with them during collaboration. These responses suggest that these school leaders note that their role in collaboration is important to the effectiveness of collaboration.

Participants in this study defined collaboration by describing a relationship between regular and special education teachers that consisted of various job functions done together in order to provide effective instruction to students. Throughout the descriptions, school leaders identified that professionals needed common planning time in order to prepare for these shared job functions. However, the ability to provide this time throughout the teachers' school day was a deficit. When common planning time was built into schedules, though, the agenda was set to discuss student issues, data, and other issues relevant to a group of teachers, not just a teaching time. Additionally, in describing collaboration between two disciplines, these principals agreed

that in order for regular and special education teachers to meet successful, each teacher must possess certain personality characteristics. These include a positive attitude, being professional responsible, respect colleagues, be committed to students, and display effective interpersonal skills. Without these skills, school leaders note that the relationship is strained.

Furthermore, these school leaders were asked to share with the researcher how they gained knowledge on practices in collaboration between regular and special education teachers. Overwhelmingly, respondents shared that they had received little to no training from their current school district. However, the leaders that did share they had experience were being utilized within the district to develop programs for students with disabilities and train staff on best practices in service deliver. Only one school leader interviewed acknowledged receiving training on this relationship throughout leadership preparation programs.

Additionally, school leaders reported that they rarely assign teachers roles and responsibilities, or ask for products that document teachers are collaborating together. They feel as though it is in the best interest of teachers, or their professional responsibility to collaborate together. In fact, one principal plainly stated that one of her safeguards to ensuring that this happens in feedback from parents. Surprisingly, only one participant noted even requiring any form of product from teachers to document planning. After review of this document, no mention was made to how the teachers engaged in collaboration or co-teaching. Therefore, monitoring of collaboration by school leaders is not being done.

However, despite the deficits in collaborative time and the assignment of roles, responsibilities, and products, these school leaders feel that the support and feedback they provide to teachers on their collaboration is appreciated by teachers. They attribute their feedback to the utilization of the teacher evaluation system, having open door policies, and being

visible in classrooms. It is felt by these leaders that these opportunities allow teachers to access them for feedback and questions. Furthermore, they feel that overall; they provide an average amount of leadership in the collaborative efforts of general and special education teachers.



## **Chapter V**

### **Findings, Interpretations, Implications, and Recommendations**

#### **Study Overview**

The study examined the role of school leaders in collaboration between regular and special education teachers. The purpose was to evaluate their role within the context of teacher collaboration and what factors contribute to their level of leadership and participation. To meet the needs of federal accountability regulations, literature asserted that school leaders are promoting a collaborative planning process among educators (Fullan, 2002; Halverson, Grigg, Pritchett & Thomas, 2007). Additionally, literature on collaboration showed that its level of success depended on several characteristics. These characteristics include participants' ability to: share information about students; possess a deep understanding and knowledge of curriculum; be self-aware of their practice; and possess interpersonal skills. Furthermore, throughout the process the collaborative team should consist of multiple perspectives; and be able to work under established roles (Fisher, Frey & Thousand, 2003; Friend & Cook, 2003; Jones, 2011; Ripley, 1997; Thayer-Bacon & Brown, 1995; Voltz, Elliott & Cobb, 1994; West & Cannon, 2001). The literature indicated, too, that because of weaknesses in this area, teacher preparation programs are making efforts to prepare students to become effective collaborators (Anderson, 2013; Clark-Luque & Latunde, 2014; Hamman, Lechtenberger, Griffin-Shirley, & Zhou, 2013; Milteniene & Venclovaite, 2012). By adding this component to teacher preparation programs, it is felt that teachers will enter the field better prepared to work with their colleagues from other disciplines. This qualitative study of the role of the school leader in collaboration between regular and special education teachers collected narrative data, which supported the findings.

Focusing on the characteristics of effective collaboration, the study explored how the school leaders' definition of collaboration impacted their role in the process through the products and processes they required roles they assign teachers, and the support and feedback they provided to them. Observing teacher collaboration in action, reviewing documents, and interviewing school leaders, the researcher found that the rural school leader's participation in collaborative practices between general and special education teachers is minimal. However, the researcher found that school leaders who were experienced in providing special education services or had sought out professional development activities to further their knowledge about collaboration between the two disciplines showed a more active role than their colleagues who did not. That being said, all school leaders felt as though their role they take on in collaboration between general and special education teachers was effective and perceived well by teachers. Chapter V focuses on interpretation of the results of the study, implications to current and future school leaders, as well as recommendations for further research.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The federal government's alignment of IDEIA to the ESEA act in 2004 brought attention to the achievement of students receiving special education services. According to the United States Department of Education, students with disabilities in 8th grade had, on average, a 28% pass rate in Mathematics and a 35% pass rate in Reading during the 2012-2013 school year. (ed.gov, 2015). These pass rates are of great concern to school leaders and the general/special educators working under them. In an effort to improve these results, school leaders have included students with disabilities into general education environments (Roden, Borgemenke, & Holt, 2013; Telfer & Howley, 2014). Inclusion allows for students with disabilities to receive their education from content experts in conjunction with special educators who specialize in

individualized instruction. Telfer & Howley (2014) state, “Many educators and policy makers—including those from the United States Department of Education — view the improved achievement of students with disabilities through the use of inclusive education practices as an important social justice issue” (p. 3).

In order for inclusive education to be successful, school leaders are engaging teachers across disciplines in collaborative processes to develop ways in which they can meet the individual needs of students with disabilities. The school leader's role in these processes also impacts their success. Several researchers have found that administrators are responsible for fostering a culture within their schools that involves effective facilitation of collaboration through the structures and behaviors that they implement (Berebitsky, Goddard & Carlisle, 2014; Ketterlin-Geller, Baumer & Lichon, 2015). Once established, teachers are then enabled to strengthen their instruction as a result of their participation in a collaborative process (Bruce & Flynn, 2013; Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen & Grissom, 2015). By strengthening their instruction, the achievement rates of students with disabilities will also be enhanced. The word collaboration has become a commonly used term by educators to describe how they work together planning, and implementing instruction. However, teachers are often times left to collaborate with little direction and little or no participation from school leaders as the process unfolds. For exchanges between education professionals to positively impact student achievement, it is felt that the role of the school leader is important.

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the school leader's role within the context of teacher collaboration and what factors contributed to their level of leadership and participation. Research suggests that schools where teachers felt a high level of support for collaboration had higher levels of achievement (Berebitsky, Goddard, & Carlisle, 2014; Bruce & Flynn, 2013).

These results suggest that the principal's role in shaping collaboration processes for teachers is critical to the organizational change that takes place when forming a school climate that values teacher collaboration ultimately raising the achievement of students with disabilities.

A phenomenological hermeneutic inquiry was conducted and guided by the research questions below to learn the role of school leaders in collaboration between teachers. The researcher sought to learn the meaning of participants' role in collaboration to interpret how rural school leaders facilitate and participate in collaboration between general and special education staff.

### **Overarching question**

How does the rural school leader participate in collaborative practices between general and special education teachers?

### **Sub questions**

- a. Do the leadership qualities of school leaders in rural schools impact the productivity during collaborative opportunities given to general and special education teachers?
- b. How do school leaders in rural school districts perceive the effectiveness of collaboration between general and special education teachers?

### **Findings**

Observations, interviews with school leaders, and review of documents were performed to determine how the rural school leader participates in collaborative practices between general and special education teachers. The research conducted used a qualitative, phenomenological hermeneutic design to answer the overarching research question. The sub questions asked if the leadership qualities of school leaders impacted the productivity during collaboration and how

school leaders perceive the effectiveness of collaboration between general and special education teachers. Interviewing the purposely selected participants resulted in themes that provided information on the school leaders meaning of collaboration, what role they take in collaborative activities with teachers, and the perceptions of teachers and themselves about this role.

### **Finding I**

The initial findings indicated that school leaders' meaning of collaboration include many of the characteristics identified in the body of research.

#### **Collaboration is Impacted by Certain Characteristics**

The participants' conversations identified characteristics required for collaboration to be successful that fell into three themes: curriculum knowledge, planning and preparation, and interpersonal skills. The overarching finding was that all participants believed that the success of general and special education teachers working together depends on the knowledge, personality, and planning time made available to teachers. The themes that developed from the conversations on the meaning of collaboration have implications for current and aspiring leaders. When pairing teachers together, the school leader should be mindful of the experiences each teacher has had over their tenure as well as teachers' willingness to invest time and effort into learning new content. By doing this, school leaders will ensure that either curriculum knowledge exists or that teachers are able to acquire it willingly. Also, current and aspiring school leaders need to be mindful of the personalities of individual teacher, as they impacted the relationship of the team. Participants note that the relationship between co-teachers can make or break the pair's ability to become a team. One participant noted that she did not give teachers an option about participating in co-teaching but that since she rotated teaching teams, it didn't impact the teachers' relationships since they knew well in advance when they would be co-teaching.

Additionally, she noted that this allowed the special education partner to be with the same students for multiple years. Lastly, school leaders need to ensure that professionals that are provided time together to plan for instruction. Although all participants' conversations included that time together to plan was critical to the meaning of collaboration, none of them provided their teachers time dedicated to for them to do it. Participants viewed collaborative planning time as team and department meetings where colleagues could review data and discuss group topics, sometimes set by the administrator, together. Therefore, school leaders who expect teachers to co-teach not only need to develop schedules that reflect co-teaching but also provide for common planning time. This will allow educators to not only discuss student data and address issues occurring in class, but will also provide them the opportunity to plan together for every element of classroom instruction that must occur from material preparation to student assessment utilizing both educators' expertise. This area was also noted by participants as difficult to implement.

## **Finding II**

The leadership style that the school principal brings to the building is impacted by the experience and training the principal has received.

### **Importance of the Leaders' Style**

Three participants in the study were credentialed to supervise special education issued by the state. During teacher observation, these three school leaders' teachers displayed the most characteristics of effective collaboration. Additionally, the one participant that noted having received training through formal course work displayed a stronger role in the collaboration occurring between their teachers. Conversations with these leaders emphasized what was observed in teachers. That each individual teacher brought certain skills to the team that

impacted co-teaching. They all were able to dictate that the special education teacher had a role within the classroom. Those participants who came from other disciplines expressed during interviews that the special educator was there more as a support for students than an active member in instruction.

Conversely, those principals who viewed collaboration solely as a teacher responsibility showed no involvement in the process. They expressed through interviews that special education teachers were in general education classrooms to support students. Interestingly, these participants were those that also said during interviews that they were concerned with being viewed as micro-managers. Moreover, the school leader who communicated with the researcher during the participant section process that stated co-teaching was a high school concept displays an even greater lack of knowledge. The perception held by this principal compromises the principal's role in serving as an instructional leader responsible in part for the enforcement of federal regulation. In addition, the school leaders in the region where participants were solicited who expressed that collaboration or co-teaching didn't take place have not yet valued the importance of aligning instruction for students with disabilities to the same degree as their non-disabled peers.

Implications for school leaders from these conversations are that in order to ensure effective collaborative teaching teams, school districts should invest in training school leaders on both the models of collaboration between regular and special education teachers, and special education practices so that school leaders can gain a better understanding of the disciplines expertise and how it can work within the context of general education.

**Finding III**

School leaders' define collaboration between regular and special education teachers in a way that indicates the need to plan for every element of instruction; however, do not require teachers to produce any evidence that collaboration takes place.

**Procedures to Monitor Collaboration, Absent**

During interviews, conversation took place about what the word collaboration means to school leaders in relation to regular and special education teachers. Throughout these conversations, school leaders' shared that collaboration requires teachers to take time together to review data, analyze and share student data, and have knowledge of district's curriculum and content. However, none of the school leaders shared a district or school procedure to indicate that this takes place. Three referred to teachers' having the ability to document planning through online lesson plan submission systems. Two of the three systems were where teachers had the ability to see the lesson plan developed by the general education teacher. The third was a standard format for lesson planning used by teachers, but did not specifically ask teachers to document shared instructional responsibility.

To monitor that teachers have shared instructional responsibilities in providing educational services to students, school leaders' should develop tools that hold them accountable to planning for them. By developing lesson plan components that note things such as the role each professional will take, data used to make instructional decisions, modifications and adaptations being used to meet individual student need should be included. Furthermore, school leaders should develop tools that teachers can use as a facilitation guide during planning time to ensure all elements of co-teaching are addressed. These elements could include elements such as



student disabilities, formative assessment data, co-teaching method being used, procedures used in instruction, assessment of students, and reflection.

#### **Finding IV**

School leaders acknowledge that collaboration involves each discipline working together to effect student achievement, however teachers are not being assigned roles and responsibilities to support that these actions take place.

##### **Defined Roles, a Weakness**

School leaders assigned teachers from both disciplines to attend in service activities, department meetings, and team meetings. However, several principals noted that an area of need within their district related to a lack of knowledge about the different roles and responsibilities teachers could be addressed through co-teaching methodologies. One school leader noted specifically that her teachers' needed to gain more knowledge in this area where two others noted that the co-teaching initiatives initiated in their districts by first informing teachers about co-teaching methods. One non-participant in the study shared that even though training was provided, the district did not employ co-teaching because the school level administrators did not buy into the training that was provided to them.

As a critical component to co-teaching, administrators and teachers alike need to have a common understanding of the types of co-teaching methods teams can employ. In doing this, the building's instructional leader can assist in the co-teaching process by helping teachers define their role in the classroom. Through participation in common planning time, school leaders can help teachers compile student information, assessment data, the level of content knowledge of each teacher, and personality characteristics in order to assign roles in instruction when a common understanding of co-teaching methods is present among participants.

**Finding V**

School leaders employ an open door policy, informal classroom visits and the state's adopted teacher evaluation model to provide support and feedback to teachers.

**Support and Feedback, a Strength**

In evaluating the state's model of teacher evaluation, it was noted that this process provides ongoing feedback and support to teachers. Additionally, it allows for conversation to take place using an online submission process where teachers and school leaders can dialog. The tool is set up for dialog about formal and informal observations and overall evaluation of teacher performance to take place. The two-way dialog is centered on an educator evaluation tool adopted by the state that categorizes teachers' practice in four broad domains.

Through conversation with school leaders, they viewed this tool as a benefit to providing and documenting educator performance. Even though no administrator noted during our conversations that they use this tool to specifically note performance as it pertains to collaboration, the four domains of educator effectiveness encompass the characteristics noted in the research to support effective collaboration. Additionally, several school leaders attribute open door policies and informal classroom visits as a means to provide support and feedback. These two things also can relate back to finding II, leadership style. Those school leaders who use tactics that support an open communication line for teachers can provide more feedback and support to teachers just by being available to offer them suggestions, provide the opportunity for questions, and give them feedback.

**Interpretation**

The study appraised the role of the school leader in collaboration between regular and special education teachers. What transpired through observation, interviews, and document

reviews was that school leaders' take a minimal role in these activities. The participant's conversations revealed most that they had a common understanding of what it means for general and special education teachers to collaborate, but the role they take in the process, procedures put into place to support collaboration, and roles they assigned. teachers were minimal. Even still, school leaders in this study provide an adequate level of feedback and support to teachers on their performance.

Research shows that collaboration between teachers involves several characteristics key characteristics (Thayer-Bacon & Brown, 1995). These characteristics include participant's ability to: share information about students; have a deep understanding and knowledge of curriculum; be aware of their practice; and possess good interpersonal skills. Additionally, throughout the process the collaborative team should be composed of teachers who possess multiple perspectives and are able to work under established roles (Fisher, Frey & Thousand, 2003; Friend & Cook, 2003; Jones, 2011; Ripley, 1997; Thayer-Bacon & Brown, 1995; Voltz, Elliott & Cobb, 1994; West & Cannon, 2001). Interview responses about what collaboration meant to school leaders included discussion on each of these characteristics. However, when observing teachers engaged in collaborative activities, not all were displayed. Mainly, the characteristics that would have been displayed during planning were not present. This shows that school leaders possess an understanding of what collaboration between teacher's means, but are interpreting the characteristics differently. For example, while planning time was identified as a key characteristic in the meaning of collaboration, no school leader offered their teachers dedicated time to plan for instruction. Instead, school leaders viewed opportunities where teachers came together with colleagues in department or team meetings as common planning

time. Additionally, a large emphasis was placed on the relationship between co-teachers which is largely impacted by good interpersonal skills.

ESEA and IDEIA have increased the school administrators' role in leading instruction. Research suggests that schools where teachers felt a high level of support for collaboration had higher levels of achievement (Berebitsky, Goddard, & Carlisle, 2014; Bruce & Flynn, 2013). The second and third subset of questions asked during interviews addressed the principal as instructional leader in the school. Questions were aimed at understanding the level of training administrators had and what procedures and responsibilities teachers were assigned to teachers. Most often, school leaders were trained in co-teaching methods through professional development they obtained on their own. However, a large number of school leaders had no formal training in co-teaching, yet were expected to lead the initiative within the school. Furthermore, those school leaders who had special education experience or formal training through coursework showed a stronger presence in collaboration as evidenced during teacher observations. In these situations, the teachers were observed interacting with course content more than the special education teacher supporting the general education during instruction.

Mostly, school leaders referenced lesson plans as the only procedure used to document collaboration during these conversations. However, these conversations referenced that both the general and special education teachers had access to the same lesson plan format or could view each other's plans. No school leader expected for teachers to show evidence of collaboration within their lesson plans. Additionally, it was largely mentioned during these questions that it was the teachers' professional responsibility to collaborate with each other. The expectation of the school administrator is ambiguous to teachers. School leaders should take advantage of

opportunities to establish an effective collaborative environment by providing their staff clear expectations for collaboration.

Research states that the members of a schools' leadership team are important to establishing an effective collaborative environment (Berebitsky, Goddard & Carlisle, 2014; Fullan, 2002; Halverson, Grigg, Pritchett & Thomas, 2007; Ketterlin-Geller, Baumer & Lichon, 2015). Actions taken by this group involves providing not only strong characteristics of leadership but also effective interpersonal skills and the ability to recognize educator's need for resources (Fisher, Frey & Thousand 2003; Friend 2000; Lorenz 1999; Ripley 1997; Voltz & Elliott 1996; Voltz, Elliott & Cobb 1994; West & Cannon 1988). In observing teaching teams engaged in collaborative activities, administrators were not present. School leaders shared in conversations about their involvement in these activities that some do participate in department and team meetings when scheduled allow. One participant noted that the agenda and topics of these meetings are set by her, which shows strong leadership however, does not allow for educators to have opportunity to specifically address their needs as they pertain to co-teaching.

Effective collaboration within teacher teams through co-teaching needs to also be supported by administrators. Administrators must take into careful consideration the scheduling of teachers and students to allow for opportunities of co-teaching to take place and be sure professionals are prepared and trained in co-teaching practices (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain & Shamberger, 2010; Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014; Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Riehl, 2000). These efforts assist in assigning teachers roles and responsibilities pertaining to co-teaching practices. In gaining training and providing teachers opportunities to become developed in co-teaching practices and methods, the procedures and responsibilities that come with co-teaching will be better developed in schools that participated in this study. These

opportunities would need to come from school district leadership making co-teaching a priority and focusing district resources on ways to train administrators and teachers in co-teaching methodology.

The final subset of interview questions focused on how school leaders perceive the effectiveness of collaboration between general and special education teachers. Questions asked what type of support and feedback they provide to teachers about their collaboration, as well as how they rated their involvement in leading collaborative efforts between regular and special educators. However, the most common theme among school principals was that feedback specific to collaboration was not provided. This was due in part to the fact that the school leader was not responsible for direct supervision of special education professionals. This responsibility fell on a central office administrator, often times the Director of Special Education. When feedback was provided to these teaching teams, then, it was primarily through direct conversation with employees. Times for conversation were when the school leader held an open door policy or made a purposeful effort to be visible in classrooms for teachers to access them.

However, when school leaders did provide support and feedback for collaboration, they used a web based application that supported the state's education evaluation system. The state's adopted evaluation model encompassed the characteristics for effective collaboration under four broad domains. Indirectly, then, school leaders who directly supervised the regular and special education teachers in their buildings provided individual feedback and support on collaboration. Missing from these platforms is feedback and support provided directly to the teachers functioning as a team on their efforts to collaborate. This can be done through feedback on lesson plans, review of minutes from collaborative activities, or feedback provided to the teachers when reflecting on lessons taught.

### **Implications**

Findings from the analysis respond to the research questions and have implications for school districts, school leaders, and teachers. At the school district level, the implications are related to establishing a standards-based curriculum and providing teachers adequate professional development opportunities. By establishing a standards-based curriculum, districts will ensure that they have met their obligations to the alignment of the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act. This type of curriculum will provide standards aligned instruction to all learners delivered by a highly qualified teacher. Then, districts have the responsibility to provide training and allocate resources for teachers to be able to implement it. Additionally, school districts should provide targeted professional development to teachers who are engaged in team teaching on characteristics of effective collaboration and methods of co-teaching. Providing this knowledge to teachers will enable them to perform outside of the one teach one assist roles that was most commonly seen in this study.

For school leaders, implications fall in the areas of planning for instruction, teacher accountability, and individual knowledge. When planning for instruction, school leaders must ensure that teachers who are co-teaching have opportunities to plan together. This time should be dedicated to analyzing student data, share student information, and designing instruction and assessment that meet individual learner characteristics. Without this time, the relationship between professional disciplines does not merge together to present as a teaching team whose expertise is in content and specially designed instruction. Secondly, principals should establish accountability measures for teachers as a way to monitor collaborative practices. By doing this, school leaders will be able to monitor educators methods of teaching, assessing, use of district

curriculum. Lastly, school leaders must seek out opportunities to grow professional in order to maintain their instructional leadership practice. If school leaders fall behind on best practices for providing education to students, teachers will continue to provide instruction using methods and practices they know and risk not reaching all students.

This study also presents implications for teachers. First and foremost, teachers need to be forthcoming with school leaders about their thoughts and perceptions of working across disciplines as well as provide specific feedback about individual teachers they are to be working with. Since personal characteristics impact the effectiveness of collaboration, this disclosure form teachers will allow for a positive working relationship. Furthermore, teachers need to stay informed about their school district's curriculum expectations in order to provide appropriate instruction. Additionally, they need to become experts in the content in which they are teaching. Content and curriculum knowledge will enable a teaching team to engage in many of the characteristics of effective collaboration that take place during common planning time.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Since 2001, collaboration between general and special education teachers has become increasingly important. This importance stems from wording contained in the No Child Left Behind Act which states that all students must access the general curriculum by a highly qualified teacher (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain and Shamberger 2010). Additionally, the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act emphasized that students with disabilities be educated in their least restrictive environment (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain and Shamberger 2010). The combination of these two acts has education professionals across disciplines using collaboration as a means to satisfy these requirements. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the school leader's role within the context of teacher collaboration and



what factors contributed to their level of leadership and participation. Through observation, interviews, and document reviews, recommendations for future research on collaboration came to fruition.

In observation of teachers engaged in instruction and conversations with administrators about co-teaching, the primary method observed and discussed was one teach and one assist, where the general education teacher was the primary instructor. As educators collaborating must be able to work under established roles, the field of education would benefit from research conducted on how teaching teams select which method of co-teaching they will implement (Fisher, Frey & Thousand, 2003; Friend & Cook, 2003; Jones, 2011; Ripley, 1997; Thayer-Bacon & Brown, 1995; Voltz, Elliott & Cobb, 1994; West & Cannon, 2001).

Additionally, Friend (2002) states “Although I could make many recommendations about specific ideas and strategies for promoting collaborative practices in schools, the very first and most fundamental one would be to raise teachers’ and administrators’ understanding of and commitment to collaboration as a critical part of school functioning, and then to extend that understanding to the general community” (p. 224). During interview discussions, school principals noted that teachers were in need of training on co-teaching strategies and methods in order to have better implementation of inclusion in their buildings. Therefore, it would be beneficial to examine the impact that professional development activities have on the implementation of effective co-teaching practices. Also, in terms of teacher preparedness and in light of teachers being highly qualified in course content areas, several principals commented on the benefit students receive by having instruction provided by teachers highly qualified in specific content areas. Therefore, a research recommendation is the impact of student scores on federal accountability measures on general education teachers of co-teaching.

Lastly, when discussing the impact of teacher relationships on the success of co-teaching, conversation emerged about the benefits teachers' gain by working with one another across disciplines. It was noted by one Principal that she noticed the amount of growth a new teacher had when she was paired with a veteran teacher simply because the veteran teacher was able to share the knowledge she gained from past experience. Research conducted on the impact of co-teaching when pairing a new teacher with a veteran teacher would inform the field about any benefit received from teachers sharing knowledge with each other through team teaching.

### **Conclusion**

Observations, interviews with school leaders, and review of documents were performed to determine how the rural school leader participates in collaborative practices between general and special education teachers. The research conducted used a qualitative, phenomenological hermeneutic design to answer the how the rural school leader participates in collaborative practices between general and special education teachers. Additionally, two sub questions asked if the leadership qualities of school leaders impacted the productivity during collaboration and how school leaders perceive the effectiveness of collaboration between general and special education teachers. Interviews resulted in themes that provided information on the school leaders meaning of collaboration, what role they take in collaborative activities with teachers, and the perceptions of teachers and themselves about this role.

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**APPENDIX A**

**Co-Teacher**

**Observation Protocol**

**Observation Protocol Form V1**

Observer: _____			
LEA: _____		Date of activity: _____	
Description of activity:			
Participants:	Participant ID	Participant ID	Participant ID
* School leader	P0_____	P0_____	P0_____
	P0_____	P0_____	P0_____
Was a school leader involved?		Yes: _____	No: _____
Characteristics of Collaboration observed: *use multiple sheets if necessary			
	P0_____	P0_____	P0_____
Comm. student info.			
Relate student info. to data			
Displays curriculum knowledge			
Admits strengths/weaknesses			
Uses experience to problem solve			
Displays a positive attitude			
Shows professional responsibility			
Is committed to students			
Respects colleagues			
Has defined role in collaboration*			

*if yes, what role?			
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Characteristics of Collaboration observed (con't):			
	P0 ____	P0 ____	P0 ____
Effective interpersonal skills			
Knowledgeable of education environments			
Able to provide solutions to problems			
Solutions are prioritized during activity			
Values differences of opinion			
Displays knowledge of practices in differentiation			
Resources available for outcomes			
Plans for dissemination of information resulting from activity			

Summary of outcomes resulting from collaboration activity?



**APPENDIX B**

**School Leader**

**Interview Protocol**

**Interview Protocol - Administrators V1**

**Thank you for participating in this interview. I am looking into the role of school leaders (principals and assistant principals) in collaboration between General and Special Education Teachers. My questions are focused on your experiences as an administrator. Your answers will remain confidential. If there are times when my question is unclear to you, please let me know. The first few questions relate to your knowledge of collaboration.**

1. What does the word collaboration between regular and special education mean to you?
2. Please tell me about the characteristics that make collaboration successful.
3. What types of trainings have you received in collaboration between regular/special education staff from your school division?
4. Who provided them to you? (district, state, etc, attorney, trainer).
5. What types of procedures relating to collaboration does your LEA have in place?
6. How does district personnel train administrative and teaching staff on these procedures?

**I'm going to ask you next some questions about your role in the collaborative process.**

7. How do you support general and special education teachers in working together?
8. How are these actions meaningful to teachers that are providing instruction to students?
9. What job responsibilities do you assigned. teachers that document collaboration is occurring?
10. What are the systems in place that help teachers manage these responsibilities?
11. What ways to you provide feedback to your teachers on their collaborative efforts?
12. On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the most involvement, how would you rate your involvement in leading collaborative efforts between regular and special educators?

**Thank you for your time. I hope that I can contact you should I have any additional questions or need clarification on your responses to the questions asked today.**

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Letters to Participate**

Superintendent of Rural School District, Pennsylvania

October, 2015

I am asking permission to conduct a qualitative research study investigating principals' role in collaboration between regular and special education teachers in a rural school district. A principal will be asked to volunteer to be a study participant. In addition to principals' as participants, a general and special education teacher working under the principals' leadership who is participating in co-teaching strategies will be involved. The researcher will observe the teachers engaged in one collaborative planning session and one co-teaching session. Then, the researcher will meet with the principal face to face with the research for an audiotaped interview at a time and place of the principal's choice for 60-90 minutes. The interview will be semi-structured and ask questions pertaining to the principal's role in the collaboration that was observed. Additionally, the researcher will conduct a document review of plans, notes, and materials regarding the collaborative process. The participants may refuse to participate in the entire study or part of the study and are free to withdraw at any time.

The researcher will provide all forms and materials needed for completion of this study. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this study. The identity of study participants will not be disclosed to anyone and findings will be reported in aggregate format. Only the researcher will have access to the data. Participants will not directly benefit from participating in the study and there will be no compensation for the participants in this study.

Questions concerning this research may be addressed to Joseph R. Sciuolo at [jsciu001@odu.edu](mailto:jsciu001@odu.edu).

Principal of Rural School PA

October 2015

The superintendent has approved a request to conduct a research study in your school district. Principals are being asked to volunteer to be participants for a study investigating a principal's role in collaboration between regular and special education teachers. I am asking your permission to conduct the qualitative research investigation in your school. If you participate, a collaborative planning session and lesson between a regular and special education teacher engaged in co-teaching will be observed. Following the observation, and 60-90 minute face to face audiotaped interview at a time and place of your choice will take place. During this time, a semi-structured interview will take place about the observations made. Additionally, a document review of plans, notes, and materials regarding collaboration will be reviewed.

The researcher will provide all forms and materials needed for completion of this study. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this study. The identity of study participants will not be released to anyone, and findings will be reported in aggregate only. Only the researcher will have access to the data. Participants will not directly benefit from participating in this study and there will be no compensation for the participants in the study. Questions concerning this research may be addressed to Joseph R. Sciuolo at [jsciu001@odu.edu](mailto:jsciu001@odu.edu).

**APPENDIX D**

**Participant**

**Demographic Form**

**Participant Demographic Form V1**

Participant:	P0_____	Interview Date:	
Interviewer:		Contact Date:	

Please complete the following information prior to our interview scheduled for \_\_\_\_\_.

**Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Race/Ethnicity:** (check one)

African American		Biracial/Multiracial	
Native American		White/Euro American	
Asian American		Hispanic	
Other		Not Specified (enter below)	

**Gender:** (check one) Female \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_

**Highest Degree Completed:** (check one)

Bachelor's Degree: \_\_\_\_\_ Master's Degree: \_\_\_\_\_ Doctorate Degree: \_\_\_\_\_

**Credentials** (Certifications/Licenses):\* \_\_\_\_\_

\*researcher will obtain from Department of Education teacher information management system and have participant confirm and add if needed.

**Number of years in education:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Number of years working as a Principal/Assistant Principal:** \_\_\_\_\_