

# The Experience of Middle Grade Teachers in a Culture of Collaboration

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**Abstract**—Collaboration is a powerful tool for professional development and central for creating opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practice. However, school districts continue to have difficulty both implementing and sustaining collaboration. The purpose of this research was to investigate the experience of the teacher in a creative, instructional collaboration. The teachers in this study found that teacher-initiated collaboration offered them trust and they were more open with their partners. An interpretative phenomenological analysis was used for this study as it told the story of the teacher's experience. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was chosen for this study to capture the complex and contextual nature of the teacher experience from a creative, instructional collaborative experience. This study sought to answer the question of how teachers in a private, faith-based school experience collaboration. In particular, the researcher engaged the study's participants in interviews where they shared their unique perspectives on their experiences in relation to this phenomenon. Through the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis, the researcher interpreted the experiences of each participant in an attempt to gain deeper insight into how teachers made sense of their understanding of collaboration. In addition to the researcher's interpreting the meaning of this construct for each research participant, this study gave a voice to the individual experiences and positionality of each participant at the research site. Moreover, the key findings presented in this study shed light on how teachers within this particular context participated in and made sense of their experience of creating an instructional collaborative. The research presented the findings that speak to the meaning that each research participant experienced in their relation to participating in building a collaborative culture and its effect on professional and personal growth. The researcher provided recommendations for future practice and research possibilities. The research findings demonstrated the unique experiences of each participant as well as a connection to the literature within the field of teacher professional development. The results also supported the claim that teacher collaboration can facilitate school reform. Participating teachers felt less isolation and developed more teacher knowledge.

**Keywords**—Collaboration, professional development, teacher, growth.

## I. INTRODUCTION

COLLABORATION is teachers working and learning together to achieve common goals. The assumption by many school principals and administrators is that teachers will change their practices in significant ways when they work together to achieve a common vision; that working and planning together is, by itself, a powerful professional

development tool [2]. Reference [3] defined powerful collaboration as a "systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice" (p. 36). Collaboration has the potential to strengthen the school as a whole through enhanced student achievement [3]. It also builds morale through the development of shared norms of core practices, reflective dialogue, socialization structures and de-privatization practices, which in turn helps build a professional learning community [4].

Collaborative practices have been defined as central to professional development because they further opportunities for teachers to establish networks of relationships through which they may reflectively share their practice, revisit beliefs, on teaching and learning and co-construct knowledge [4], [5]. Researchers also found that collaborative group learning is the most powerful form of professional development [7]-[10] and that collaborative learning is highly effective in meeting the needs of every child in the classroom [12]-[14]. Reference [7] stated that the opportunity to collaborate has been cited as the most important factor in promoting collegiality and suggests that collaborative problem solving is the most effective form of professional development.

There are many models of collaborative arrangements and their assumed power for creating change in the educational literature. Additionally, it is important to note the nuances of collaboration within a middle school environment as middle schools were among the first to institute what was referred to as interdisciplinary teams. Because middle schools were designed to meet the individual needs of students by creating small learning communities, subjects became departmentalized and teacher interdisciplinary teams were built to make decisions about curriculum and instruction [14]. These teams were comprised of teachers from different academic disciplines that taught the same students [15]. The idea was that these small learning communities would provide teachers with the opportunities to get to know the students better, and therefore, be better able to facilitate their needs with excellent results [15], [18]. While this model is still used today, this paper suggests that these interdisciplinary teams (now known as professional learning communities) could see further gains by having teachers lead their own learning on these teams as collaborative models are viewed as essential to teacher learning and ultimately, to student learning [18], [19]. All of the models assume that teachers can learn when given the opportunity to work together [1], [21]. These research findings about the importance of collaboration in changing teacher practice have led to its widespread acceptance as an

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essential component of any effort aimed at improving teacher learning.

Collaboration is considered to be a central element of major school reform efforts [2], [23], [24]. However, only 56% of districts in the United States report training teachers in collaborative learning [25] and it has been estimated that only 5%-10% of participants involved in collaborative learning continue the use of the collaborative over time [25, p.6]. Given the focus in school reform efforts on teacher collaboration, it is worthwhile to examine the collaborative experience from the teacher's perspective in order to gain insight into the experience that individual teachers construct from a creative instructional collaborative experience.

Collaboration represents a marked shift in educational practice. Reference [26] points out that the isolationist mentality of many schools and districts could be (and in places still can be) seen in the "Teacher of the Year" or "Staff Member of the Month" awards that highlight the individualism and isolationism of the profession. Also, teachers are often misinformed about what constitutes collaborative. Some think that teachers can only help a child in their area of expertise; or that a special education teacher can only help a special education student [26]. Teachers also think that the workload will be cut in half (or doubled) or that only one teacher is responsible for writing the lesson plan. Still others think that this is merely another trend that will soon be gone [26]. In taking away their autonomy, there is concern that there will be a mindset of a "group-grade" (looking at the teachers as a group instead of single contributors to a group) for the teachers and an inability to properly assess the students [25].

Reference [28] has noted reluctance in teachers to engage in collaborative efforts. Because collaboration involves trial and error approaches, teachers are uncomfortable as they prefer "tried and true" strategies to learning [26].

Collaboration is difficult because it is inquiry-based learning in nature and it is meant to shift the focus of the learning to the student, which is not how most teachers have been trained [28]. Typically, teachers are trained by way of obtaining a traditional certificate (TC) by attending an accredited university. They receive varying amounts of instruction, ranging from 240 to 1,380 hours [28]. On average, they complete a total of 642 hours of instruction in their subject area [29]. Teachers who receive alternate route certification (AC) receive more than double that amount [29]. Both certifications are designed to make teachers highly qualified "to ensure that teachers have the necessary subject matter knowledge and teaching skills in the academic subjects that the teachers teach" [29].

Collaboration is necessary to the future success of our schools and our students. References [30]-[32] stated that collaboration cannot be an "educational fad," nor can it be "shallow, fragmented or unfocused" [31, p.440]. It must be based on "solid research" which is data-driven and student-focused [30, p.440]. Reference [31] also recognized that "people use the term collaboration to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in

education. In fact, the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning" (p.4).

Current studies in collaboration focus on the impact of collaboration on the student. Although there is much research on teacher collaboration and the impact of collaborative learning on student learning, there is little current research on how it benefits the teachers as individuals. In addition, nearly half of our schools do not provide professional development training in collaborative practices and most do not continue using the practice [7].

The intent of this study was to document the experiences of a particular group of educators constructing a curriculum collaboratively for an eighth grade to determine the meaning they constructed from the planned collaborative experience as it related to professional growth

#### *A. Positionality Statement*

The research was a process of constructing a creative instructional collaborative. The author was a participant. By working as a collaborative group conducting inquiry in our development and implementation of a professional development model for collaborative learning, the researcher was able to experience the processes and it allowed for a deeper, richer understanding of the value teachers constructed from a creative, instructional collaborative experience.

This study was done in a private Jewish day school in the northeastern United States. It was done with five, middle school, secular teachers in the design and implementation of a unit of study on the Holocaust.

The researcher maintained a reflexive attitude in order to avoid bias in the study. Reflexivity acknowledges that meanings acquired from the analysis of transcripts are influenced by interpretation. In order to gain a better understanding of the participants' world, this can only be done through the researcher's intimate engagement with the participants' transcripts. The research consistently focused on the real-life world of the participant through sincere and honest descriptions using the reflexive process throughout. It evokes an interpretivist ontology which construes people and the world as interrelated and engaged in a dialogic relationship that constructs multiple versions of reality. A reflexive study will therefore assume the co-construction of meaning within a socially oriented research scenario. Taking a reflexive attitude enabled a holistic approach to the research which was imperative for it to address the implications of the researcher and researched being of the same order. Thus, reflexivity was embedded throughout this.

#### *B. Collaboration Theory*

Reference [33] set the stage for research in collaboration by investigating the creative collaborations of a variety of people in art, science, mathematics, medicine, and others. She ascertained that scholars must view learning and thinking as a social process; they must become a "thought community" (p.4). She stated, "A crucial advantage of collaboration is the strength it provides to overcome one's socialization into a discipline and a thought community. Knowledge is

constructed among a community of persons mutually exchanging ideas and maintaining intellectual interaction” (p.119). Collaboration, as defined by [32] is “the interdependence of thinkers in the co-construction of knowledge” (p.3).

Reference [1] found that an individual’s personality is a system rather than a collection of traits. By watching others with whom they work and live, they challenge themselves to try to keep up with those persons and absorb others’ belief in their capabilities. Those who participate in collaborative relationships develop different emotional resources from those working in isolation. This relationship of diversity and growth is defined by [1] as complementarity; collaboration benefits from complementarity in skills, experience, and perspectives and creates a passionate interest in the subject matter. This passion is a critical component to sustaining the collaborative.

Reference [1] noted that collaboration takes time and involves “mutual care-taking” (p.128). It is the construction of a new mode of thought that involves “stretching the self” (p.44). Collaboration thrives on diversity of perspectives and on constructive dialogues between individuals’ negotiating their differences while creating their shared values and vision. It involves flights and resting places of thought. Flights are moments of consciousness that change from one moment to another and resting places correspond to sustained continuity of awareness of oneself and others involved in the collaboration. Collaboration requires individuals to relinquish aspects of their autonomy but this results in the broadening of talents and modes of thoughts and enhances individual growth. This then contributes to the growth of the group as a whole. Collaboration has no guaranteed set of values as the values of the group continue to shift as members grow both individually and as a group. Sometimes opposition and dynamic tensions are unavoidable, but they yield new understanding and knowledge. When individuals join together and build upon their complementarities, they expand their reach.

Creative collaboration, as defined by [34], is “a method that implies working in a group of two or more to achieve a common goal, while respecting each individual’s contributions to the whole” (p.205). It is a working relationship between teachers that is “spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, pervasive across time and space and unpredictable” [35, p.148]. A teaching collaborative is most effective for teacher learning when it is student-centered on curriculum and pedagogy instead of bridging gaps among its student population [35, p.148]. Collaboration is a learning process that not only has meaning but also allows individuals to exert control over their professional lives. This control is power over their learning and motivation to self-reflect [36]. Collaborative models allow teachers to “control the events that affect their lives” [37, p.1] and develop a “belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” [37, p.3]. Reference [1] noted that teacher collaborative teams can “transform the nature of adult interaction and learning in school by engaging teachers in the same process of continual learning and improvement that we ask our students to strive for in their

work” (p.60). Reference [39] stated that collaboration breaks down the feelings of isolationism by teachers and [40] revealed that participants reported diminished feelings of isolation and increased collaboration after learning as a community.

Collaboration has powerful implications for collective learning. Reference [23] stated that the “key to professional growth for collective learning are structures that break down isolation, empower teachers with professional tasks, and provide areas for thinking through standards of practice” (p.350). Reference [41] asserted that true collaboration brings teachers together “to assess their students’ understanding; design; plan and implement new instructional practices and reflect on their own teaching” (p.350). He stated that this model of collaboration is “likely to be effective and enduring when those responsible for its implementation are included in the decision-making process” (p.71). A study [42] noted that the social interactions of collaboration—not just collegiality—improved the quality of teaching and learning as well as the sense of community among teachers and showed that these healthy, collaborative relationships had a profound and lasting effect on teachers’ personal and professional lives and contributed positively to the collective efficacy of the organization. When teachers are given the ability to construct curriculum with their colleagues, they are most likely to construct it with the student in mind [43]. When the student, and not the teacher, is the focus of curriculum and pedagogy construction, the teachers share in the process of knowledge creation [33], [44]. It becomes constructivist in nature and the collaboration created through the togetherness of teacher-centered change now creates a sense of liberation [44]. Teachers are under less stress to strengthen their performance and now feel supported by a system that allows their voices to affect curriculum, pedagogy and policy [44].

A study [45] showed that when collaboration is based on curriculum and pedagogy, it is constructivist and becomes inquiry-based (curriculum-centered), which allows for “the possibility of individual transformation as well as the transformation of the social settings within the individual’s work” (p.158). The studies [46] and [47] both indicated that collaborative learning by way of inquiry-based research (curriculum-centered) contributed most to positive feelings of teacher efficacy, which promoted teacher effectiveness, fostered collegiality and further strengthened the collaboration.

Reference [48] found that collaboration has the potential to transform interactions and school cultures and [49] found that this transformation fostered organizational support for continued teacher collaboration and a professional learning community that contributed to teacher collaboration.

Reference [50] showed that the trust developed in healthy collaborative relationships impacted the macro, meso, and micro factors of the organization as a whole and increased student achievement. A follow-up study by [51] indicated that “schools showing continuous improvement in student results are those whose cultures are permeated by: a shared focus, reflective practice, collaboration and partnerships

characterized by individuals who focus on student learning, reflect on student achievement and learn as collaborative teams” (p.136). The studies [52] and [53] also effectively linked teacher collaboration to student achievement but noted that some members of the teaching staff met collaboration with resistance and unwillingness when teacher collaboration was done strictly for student achievement. However, when teacher collaboration was done for school improvement and teachers were given opportunities to collaborate on curriculum, instruction, and professional development, they were satisfied, and the results were gains in student achievement on high-stakes testing. Thus, collaborative practices are critical for successful professional development and student achievement because they act as a catalyst for teachers to establish networks of relationships, which enable them to reflect, share practices, revisit their teaching and learning philosophies and build knowledge [5], [6]. The Jewish day school is the perfect venue to study the experience of teachers in a creative instructional collaborative as it is reflective of the larger American education system but small enough to facilitate the development of best practices in collaboration.

## II. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology was selected to lend insight into the meaning teachers constructed from a creative instructional collaborative experience. Reference [54] defines qualitative research as “beginning with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p.37). Qualitative researchers seek to understand the perspectives of participants in a context, thereby making it a good choice for a school setting.

Phenomenological psychology is where an individual’s personal account of an event is used to produce a subjective view, as opposed to producing an objective statement of the event [55]. Symbolic interactionism believes that the meanings individuals ascribe to events should be of central importance to the social scientist but also notes that meanings are only obtained through a process of interpretation; the way people perceive an experience is related directly in how they talk about and behave in relation to the event. Meanings occur as a result of these interactions [56].

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) notes that one cannot gain access to the participant’s personal world without the use of the researcher; that access is dependent on the researcher’s ability to make sense of the participant’s personal world. The researcher plays a significant role in the process and is required to make sense of the data by engaging in an interpretative relationship with the transcript.

Phenomenology is a dynamic interplay among research activities in which a phenomenon is determined and a reflection of the central themes of the phenomenon is written as a description. In research, a phenomenon is the topic studied by the researcher and it is the topic described by the participants in the study. The descriptions are then interpreted

for the meanings of the various participants’ experiences [54]. It explores in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world and the meaning of those particular experiences for the participants. Husserl is a central figure in developing phenomenology as a philosophical movement [57]. The core philosophical basis of Husserl’s approach was a rejection that there is anything more fundamental than experience. Husserl argued that scientific approaches are inappropriate as human meanings are the key to studying lived experiences. This is a critical component of IPA as researchers have come to appreciate the sense-making processes of their participants [57]. IPA emphasizes that the research exercise is a dynamic part of the process with an active role for the researcher in that process [58]. It is concerned with trying to understand what it is like from the point of view of the participants, to take their side. It involves critical questions of the participants as a “cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being” [58, p.54] and it assumes a “chain of connection between people’s talk and their thinking and emotional state” [58, p.54]. An IPA has been chosen for this study because the problem of teacher collaboration is important to understand from several individual’s shared experiences in order to understand these experiences to gain a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon.

IPA has been informed by three key areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography [58]. Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation and is the second theoretical underpinning of IPA. Within hermeneutics, interpretation is considered an art whereby the analyst is able to offer an understanding to an experience. Within this theory, the relationship between the interpreter and the interpreted is acknowledged and highlighted. Reference [58] discusses that in IPA a double hermeneutic is involved whereby the researcher is trying to make sense of their world thus recognizing that the production of an interpretative account is a function of the relationship between a researcher and participant and is constructed and shaped by their encounter. The production of an interpretative account is iterative, based on the concept of the hermeneutic circle [58]. One moves back and forth through a range of multiple ways of looking at the data, whereby to understand any given part, one looks at the whole and to understand the whole one needs to look at the parts.

Finally, ideography is a major influence on IPA. An ideographic approach is concerned with the particular by investigating, in detail, how particular lived experiences have been understood from the perspective of a small group of particular people in a particular context [58].

IPA was chosen for this study because it is an insider’s perspective. This allowed the researcher to explore in detail how participants made sense of their world. It was embedded in symbolic interactionism, how meanings are constructed by individuals [58]. IPA views individuals as experts on their own experiences and can therefore offer researchers an understanding of their thoughts, commitments and feelings through their own stories, in their own words, in as much detail as possible [58]. Its underlying philosophy is that there

is no objective reality. Rather, people's experiences are influenced by their perceptions. Simultaneously, IPA emphasizes that research is a dynamic and interpretative process in which a researcher attempts to make sense of a participant trying to make sense of their experience which results in the double hermeneutics process [58]. IPA highlights the value of considering a researcher's role in influencing the process [58]. As a researcher's own views and beliefs will influence an interpretation of a participant's account, IPA stresses the importance of reflexivity to aid transparency. It recognizes that the production of an interpretative account is a function of the relationship between a researcher and participant, constructed and shaped by their encounter [59].

IPA helps to provide new and differing perspectives on a phenomenon by learning from those who are experiencing it [58]. The ideographic nature of IPA fits with the objective of this research which was to investigate in detail the individuals rather than generalizing notions for larger populations [58].

#### A. Participants

The IPA was conducted at a private, Jewish day school in the northeastern United States. The case study participants included five 8<sup>th</sup> grade faculty members who designed a curriculum on the Holocaust for each of their respective classes for 53 students for the 2014-2015 school year. All but one of the teachers had been employed by the organization for a minimum of five years so they had a thorough understanding of the community and organization and a commitment to their jobs. The group was constructed to represent all ranks of teachers in the program including full-time, part-time and support staff of General studies teachers (Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies). All had previous experience teaching 8<sup>th</sup> grade. All participants were between the ages of 45-60 years of age and all had been teaching their subject areas for over 10 years. In addition, this particular group was chosen because they exemplified the question raised in the problem of practice—they are a group of faculty members implementing a collaborative unit of study with a focus on their own personal experience while also trying to work in the larger context of the group. At the same time, they were trying to meet the needs of their administration and their students. The goal of this research was to identify the experience teachers had in a creative, instructional collaborative.

TABLE I  
PARTICIPANT DATA TABLE

Pseudo.	M/F.	Area	Teaching (yrs. in public)	Current school	Age	Degree	Collab. experience
Allen	M	Sci.	10 (2)	8	50	Mas.	1
Beatrice	F	Lang. Arts	20 (5)	15	46	Mas.	5
Charles	M	Media Spec.	25 (0)	25	51	Bach.	25
Delilah	F	Math	15 (3)	12	37	Mas.	0
Erica	F	History	18 (16)	2	52	Mas.	3

Numerals refer to years.

The research was done in a private, Jewish day school and may not be adequately representational of a public-school

population. The research was done in an 8<sup>th</sup> grade middle school which is departmentalized. These participants formed a purposive sample. A purposive sample is also commonly called a judgmental sample. It is a sample that is selected based on the knowledge of a population and the purpose of the study. It was a unique group that was well suited to examine the study.

#### B. Data Collection

##### Materials

IPA involves interpreting the "texts of life" [60, p.4]. The interviews are semi-structured because this allows engagement in dialogue whereby the initial questions are modified in light of the participants' responses. The investigator is able to probe interesting and important ideas [58]. The investigator generates probing questions prior to the interview but asks them only in the event that the participant's response prompts it. The investigator focuses on gathering data that will lead to a textural and structural description of the experience and subsequently provides an understanding of the common experiences of the participants.

##### Analytic Memos

Analytic memos are write-ups about what the researcher thinks he/she is learning during the course of their evaluation [61]. They are typically written both during and after data collection. Analytic memos are not only written about the process of collecting data but more importantly, what the researcher is seeing in the data [61]. Memos can be summaries of findings or comments and reflections on particular aspects of the evaluation. It is also an outlet for a researcher to think about what additional data might be helpful in order to fully 'tell the story' [60]. Writing analytic memos is a critical aspect of IPA and can help immensely in writing the results as it provides the basis of the researcher's analysis that will end up in the final report [62]. It can provide a summary of the patterns found in the data [62].

### III. PROCEDURES

Reference [58] recommends the use of the semi-structured interview for an IPA study. They facilitate a more informal, flexible conversation which enables the interviewer to probe particular areas of interest that arise or follow areas pertinent to the research question. A semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix A) was developed based on relevant literature, discussion with research supervisors and relevant guidance on constructing an interview schedule [58].

A small sample of the community is recommended because it is a "detailed interpretative account [...]" and can only be realistically done on a very small sample (5-6) – thus in simple terms one is sacrificing breadth for depth" [58, p.56]. The respondents should be chosen based on their willingness to participate as well as the similarities and differences in the relationship between the elements being examined [60]. It is important to have individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being studied.

Guided interviews facilitate the participants' ability to tell

their own story in their own words. Questions will be initially delivered in an open-ended and non-directive style in order to get as close to the participants' views as possible without them being led by the interviewer's questions. The interviewer followed each interview by making detailed notes about the experience, recording initial thoughts, feelings and impressions as well as documenting anything that may affect the interview such as interruptions or salient points about the environment in which the interview took place.

Participants were interviewed at school in the privacy of their classrooms and each interview lasted 30-60 minutes and was audio recorded and transcribed, with all identifying information either removed or disguised.

In IPA, observations are solely done by the investigator during the interview. The investigator monitors the effect of the interview on the respondent and interprets them for meaning [59]. The written responses of the investigator along with the interview transcripts are examined for clusters of meaning in order to provide a textual description about the respondents' experiences as well as their own.

#### *A. Data Analysis*

The focus of IPA is to understand the essence of the experience. The phenomenon is the "abiding concern" [57, p.31] and the interview responses should be interpreted for the meaning of the lived experience. A description of the phenomenon is written, maintaining a strong relation to the topic of inquiry [57]. Each interview transcript was analyzed individually. The process began by becoming familiar with each account by way of repeated reading and listening of each transcript, during which notes were made in the left-hand margins of the transcript to record anything interesting or significant about what each interviewee stated. There was a summary of content as well as comments or connections, similarities, differences, contradictions and preliminary interpretations.

Transcripts were then re-read and the right-hand margins were used to document emerging themes. This involved moving to a higher interpretative level of abstraction, general enough to allow theoretical connections within and across cases while remaining grounded in what the participant actually said. Reference [62] describes this as horizontalization to develop clusters of meaning. A textual description is written as well as a description of the investigator's own experience then a composite description of the 'essence' of the phenomenon is written. The power of IPA is that it is judged by the light it sheds within the broader context of the links readers make between the findings of an IPA study, their own personal and professional experience, and the claims of the extant literature [63]. It is the chain of connection between people's talk and their thinking and emotional state. Reference [64] asserts that meaning is central, and the aim is to try to understand the content and complexity of those meanings rather than the measure of their frequency. It is an interpretative relationship within the transcript. The transcript is read numerous times; annotations are made; a free textual analysis is done where the investigator comments on

the use of language or the persons themselves (their similarities/differences; echoes; amplifications and contradictions). There is a transformation of initial notes into themes; a connection of the themes; a making sense of the themes and finally, a master table of themes. The emergent themes will then be listed in order of appearance and attempts will be made to look for and make sense of connections between them, creating clusters. Reference [58] describes this process as a magnet "with some themes pulling others in, helping to make sense of them" (p.77). These clusters will be titled and will thereby create superordinate themes. At that point an identifier will be added to aid in the analysis and to facilitate finding the original source. It will be essential to continually return to the transcripts throughout this process to verify that the superordinate themes are reflective of what the participant actually said.

This process was repeated for all five interviews, each interview in its own light respectively as separate and individual from the other interviews. Although commonalities in themes were identified, all issues were identified in each transcript as they emerged, thus paying attention to ways in which accounts from participants were similar or different. When all five interviews had been analyzed and superordinate themes and theme clusters identified, a master list of themes and sub-themes was created, and this provided a coherent framework for understanding the value of the participants assigned to the creative collaborative experience. The master list of themes and sub-themes were translated into a narrative account as the purpose of an IPA is to try to understand the content and complexity of the participant's meanings rather than a measure of their frequency and it involves the investigator engaging in an interpretative relationship with the transcript. Care was taken to ensure that a distinction was made between what the participants said and the researcher's interpretation.

An emic account of the data was written because it is a description of behavior in terms meaningful to the actor; that is, it comes from a person within the culture. It is the inside perspective of the researcher who strives to describe a particular culture in its own terms [65].

#### *B. Validity and Credibility*

This project's purpose was to provide an IPA on the collaboration practices in an educational setting. The project's goal was to observe and note the behaviors and feelings of a group of individuals collaborating on a project and to observe and make notes of the specific educational environment. In order to increase the study's external validity, the researcher chose to select a sample base that was representative of a wide scope of individuals with varying backgrounds. The sample did not include or exclude because of religious belief or affiliation and the researcher took pains to include those individuals that would enhance the demographics of the research base. Participants were selected based on the fact that IPA views individuals as experts on their own experiences and can therefore offer researchers an understanding of their thoughts, commitments and feelings through their own stories,

in their own words, in as much detail as possible [66]. However, one cannot state that the findings of this research project can be generalized to apply to every school in every region of the United States. The researcher is confident, however, that every effort was made to present a clear representation of research data and to ensure internal and external validity from the project's very inception.

The IPA research is a process of constructing a creative instructional collaborative. The author was a participant. By working as a collaborative group conducting inquiry in our development and implementation of a professional development model for collaborative learning, the author was able to experience the processes and it allowed for a deeper, richer understanding. The author maintained a reflexive attitude in order to avoid bias. Reflexivity acknowledges that meanings acquired from the analysis of transcripts are influenced by interpretation and the researcher's intimate engagement with the participant's transcripts. Reflexivity involves interpretivist ontology and assumes the co-construction of meaning within a socially oriented research scenario. It offered a holistic approach and was embedded throughout the study.

Transferability was attained by providing a comprehensive description of all aspects of the research study including the participants and the research context [67]. They were described as thoroughly as possible throughout this study and while the study was conducted at a private, Jewish day school, it was done with secular studies teachers and can therefore be deemed valid among other middle school participants [68].

Dependability describes the extent to which the data reflects findings that are congruent with the research findings. For the purposes of this study, dependability will be achieved by providing rich and thorough accounts of the development of events and situations during the research process. In order to enhance the dependability of the data process, the repeated reading of the transcripts and rechecking of themes will be applied [58]. Discrepant data were reported as a 'Discrepancy Note' in order to flag an item as incomplete or has having a result different than expected.

Conformability refers to the extent to which findings from the research process reflect the focus of the researcher [69]. Phenomenological research acknowledges the researcher's ongoing role in the research process. In order to ensure conformability, the researcher engaged in continuous supervision with the dissertation supervisor during the research process.

### *C. Limitations of IPA*

IPA can be referred to as data-driven research rather than theory-driven research. That is, it is not typical of most research projects which commence with a predetermined set of hypotheses that the researcher wishes to confirm or refute [70]. This is because the data collection methods in IPA often lend themselves to being more flexible and open-ended and it allows participants to discuss their experiences. As a result, IPA has the ability to uncover phenomenon that may have been previously undiscovered. Additionally, the researcher

plays an active role in the research as they are required to make sense of the data collection.

Ethical approval for this study took place in 2015. Participation in this research did not present obvious risks to the participants. The project documented the practices of the participants; it did not impose any treatment that may have had negative consequences for the faculty or students. Participation in this project did not put the well-being or rights of the faculty or students at risk and the participants may in fact have benefitted from their participation in this project as they were able to examine their own teaching practice and the teaching practices of their colleagues. Participation in this project was voluntary and all participants were guaranteed the protection of their rights with the utilization of an informed signed consent document which contained the following elements adapted from [71]: identification of the researcher and cooperating institution, participant selection procedures, research purpose, benefits of the research participation, frequency and duration of participation, participant risks, confidentiality guidelines, participant withdrawal procedures and contact information. This researcher provided full disclosure of the research focus; the research's intent and the voluntary nature of participation. The researcher was particularly mindful of the vulnerability of teachers who participated in qualitative research [41]. Therefore, the participants understood their ability to withdraw from the study at any time.

## IV. RESULTS

Key points from the analysis of transcripts and observations are presented below. Overall benefits of the culture of collaboration, and its impact on personal and professional growth, are evident.

### *A. The Experience of Collaboration as a Culture*

The majority of the teachers in this study had previous experiences in collaboration. These experiences focused on professional development training in collaboration for the purpose of raising student performance. The activities and goals of this association were directed towards raising student performance. As such, collaboration was experienced as a remedial activity that teachers needed to raise their performance in order to acquire greater student success. Such professional development in collaboration was intended to improve their teaching. Professional development targeting collaboration negatively impacted teachers' perceptions of themselves as practitioners. The teachers noted that this undermined their sense of skill, knowledge, and agency and teacher collaboration held negative meaning.

Discussions surrounding collaboration led to obvious conversations about training in collaboration. When asked about professional development training in collaboration, the teachers expressed dissatisfaction.

Charles commented,

We drive these long distances to listen to these so-called 'experts' and really, you just come away feeling badly about yourself. They make it seem effortless; I

always feel like I am doing something wrong.

The meaning of these activities did not allow for professional growth. Allen spoke about it:

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

Prior negative experiences with professional development in collaboration did not connect with actual participant experiences where teachers had experienced collaboration as an informal, voluntary activity, not supported by administration. Previous experiences were reexamined as the process of creating a collaborative to build a curriculum unfolded.

The traditional teaching experience had been collaborative teams built by administrators to focus on a specific teaching task. The goal of the administrators was improved student achievement. In contrast, for participants, the experience of building a product to teach to their students was meaningful. Even more meaningful, however, was that in the building of the unit, they began to rely on one another for advice and support. They became a team and it was through their efforts as a team that their definition of collaboration morphed from one of something forced to that of something fun.

#### 1. A Culture of Inclusion and Trust

When examining the need to build a culture of collaboration, the teachers noted the importance of feeling included in the group. Trust was viewed as an important ingredient to these feelings of inclusion. The development and maintenance of a collaborative relationship allowed for feelings of trust both in themselves and their colleagues and the degree to which their colleagues were non-judgmental and supportive allowed the relationships to flourish. These relationships allowed for the active participation of the group members that led to feelings of acceptance and further encouraged their symbiotic relationships. It opened up space for vulnerability and risk-taking which in turn, developed a sense of trust which led to feelings of inclusion. They were allowed to express their feelings and felt acceptance of themselves and one another.

Delilah commented,

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

While Allen remarked,

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

They [1] were allowed to express their feelings and felt acceptance of themselves and one another. An understanding emerged that the motivation they felt to do more via the collaborative was a result of inclusion and trust. They saw the process as reciprocal and evolving, and that they benefited directly from working with one another. It added meaning and value to their work.

#### 2. A Culture of Shared Leadership

Trust and inclusion led to the realization that the shared leadership the teachers felt came as a result of the trust they had in their colleagues. This coupled with the feelings of inclusion and trust, led to no one being “in charge,” but instead, sharing the leadership roles in order for the project to be completed successfully.

Charles found this to be the case:

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

The shared responsibility of leadership galvanized them as a group with a focus on student learning. It was articulated by Allen who felt this method of collaboration provided an outlet for him to share instrumental ideas and gain knowledge by listening to the expertise of his colleagues: “This collaboration brought different teachers together in various ways. We built a community of learners in order to fulfill a goal. I hope it continues”. The desire to share leadership responsibilities increased as the teachers felt included in the collaborative synergy of the group.

Beatrice noted this:

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

Participating in this collaborative provided a meaningful sense of empowerment through shared leadership that focused directly on student learning. By focusing on the teacher’s responsibility for student learning, a culture of collaboration grew. As teachers contributed, they were viewed for the strengths they brought to the collaborative. More importantly, as teachers felt a sense of inclusion, trust, and shared leadership, they began to willingly speak about their areas of



weakness as they looked to their colleagues for advice and support. Teachers were allowed to develop their areas of weakness without feeling judged. They developed a sense of shared leadership and began not only to exchange lesson ideas, but suggestions for behaviorally challenged students.

### 3. A Culture of Respect

Inclusion and trust, coupled with the feelings of shared leadership in their colleagues, furthered the respect they developed for both their colleagues and the collaboration itself. The sense of mutual respect was a salient aspect of this cultural environment. The spirit of camaraderie in a culture of collaboration led to a heightened sense of mutual respect. In collaboration, equal partners work together to move things forward. The collaboration prompted participants to share their expertise. Allen noted these feelings, "I was not afraid to speak up – to offer my ideas. I felt valued by the group and as they saw what I could do, I think they valued me more – maybe even liked me!" While Beatrice felt, "I always respected my colleagues as co-workers. I came to see them differently in this project. Now I respect them as my friends".

Charles also commented,

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

The essence of this experience did not focus on the need to reform or remediate their teaching. Rather, a collaborative culture was formed [1] by exchanging thoughts and ideas as to how to best teach their students. The feelings of inclusion felt by the teachers in building the unit led to the sharing of leadership. The shared leadership among all of the participants increased their sense of ownership in the unit and enriched their collaborative experience. As they worked together on the unit, their respect for one another increased. They sought input on everything from their colleagues and they all helped one another in every facet of the unit as the leadership was shared.

### *B. The Experience of Collaboration in Promoting Professional Growth*

Teachers in this study were building a collaborative with the students in mind. The collaboration was never intended as a forum for professional development. And yet, professional development occurred as each teachers noted professional growth throughout the duration of the collaboration. Their sense of professional growth came directly from the feedback they received from their colleagues as to their participation in the collaborative. This took the form of compliments, advice offered and taken, and simply lending a hand to each other in order to help things progress.

What aided them in their professional growth was a resurgence of the reasons why they became teachers and that was to make a difference in the lives of their students. All of the teachers believed that the strict adherence to standards and remediation in mandated, past professional development stifled their creativity which disabled them from growing as teachers. They expressed feelings of discontent with their work and an inability to affect change in the lives of their students. Charles expressed it as feeling "stuck in neutral." Delilah noted feelings of, "Doing the same thing day after day and year after year. I feel kinda stuck". Erica commented,

The expectations of me are always changing. I feel like I am constantly re-writing my curriculum. Standards change and they are confusing; parents complain, and I have to change something. You feel stuck. I don't really make a difference here. I feel like a robot.

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

Reciprocity that developed from trust and inclusion further enhanced collegial inquiry; the more the teachers learned and saw the students learning, the more they wanted to learn and have their students continue learning. They sensed clear value in this engagement as seen by [71], who noted that a known benefit of collaboration lies in the concept of pooled intelligence. This concept is founded upon the premise that collaboration prompted all participants to share their expertise, thus increasing the knowledge and skill of all members of the group and enhancing the feelings of inclusion.

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

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

### *C. The Belief That Collaboration Provides Personal Growth*

In this collaborative, a sense of learning came directly from the feedback teachers received from their colleagues. Their colleagues motivated them and re-ignited a sense of

accountability for both their students' learning and their own learning as well. As they engaged in the collaboration, they listened to their colleagues and were forced to formulate responses that required them to articulate their instructional purpose and the expected outcome and reflect upon how closely their results matched their intentions. This collaborative facilitated the process of collegial relationship-building by serving as a forcing function for interaction. The interactive dialogue the participants experienced expanded the expertise of each individual, utilizing the pooled experiences of multiple people. The feedback from their colleagues helped them establish clear goals and expectations, thereby making the unit a success. But the collegial relationships did something else—they opened the doors for personal interactions. The discussions began to include personal conversation as well as professional ones. 'Talking shop' became just talking.

Delilah captured this in her interview:

Everyone on the team knew what was going on in my personal life. Why? Because I shared it. And you know what was weird? I didn't share in the past because I didn't want people to think I was making up excuses. There is so much pressure when you are a teacher. I shared it because I wanted to; because I needed someone to talk to. I had them. Right here in my own school, I had them. That was so nice. It made me realize that I could be a person here; that it wasn't just a job I had to do. And don't get me wrong – I definitely grew as a teacher, but I grew as a person too and my sharing led to other people in the group sharing and we became so much more than a team – we became a family.

Their professional growth as teachers directly impacted their personal growth. They loved what was gained for them professionally but were also surprised at what they gained personally. Delilah further noted,

With this project, I wasn't going at it alone. I felt I had friends and we were in it together. In fact, I was the one who screwed up! I messed up the measurements and ended up misdirecting the kids. They built it wrong. I went back to my colleagues [...] I thought they were going to kill me because now we had this deadline to make it onto a memorial ceremony. And how bad! The department head screws up! They didn't kill me. In fact, they found me more supplies and helped me to re-do it. They didn't judge. Through all of this, there was a lot going on in my personal life. They knew that. They all just pitched in and helped. I felt so loved and supported. I realized that I don't have to be perfect – that I work with a group of teachers that care. I wish we could do more of this!

All of the teachers shared that they had grown as individuals on a personal level and noted feelings of satisfaction at the idea of having "work friends" and people to share things with [1]. These feelings enhanced the culture of collaboration and allowed for the growth of each participant through mutual respect and a sense of worth. Feelings of personal satisfaction and even joy in the entire process of this

collaboration emerged from all of the teacher interviews. It also led to the personal growth of each member of the group as they came to work with the realization that they were respected, trusted and valued. The professional growth they experienced through this collaborative enabled personal development. In turn, a comfort level was established, and personal growth was gained. The teachers felt inspired and invigorated to teach. They felt like they were part of a team. They were viewed as professional and contributors to the group and these feelings helped them grow personally. They re-established themselves as professionals and in turn, established friendships and a sense of community that fostered personal growth.

TABLE II  
MASTER TABLE OF THEMES FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS

<b>Trust in My Work Environment</b>
I worked with a colleague on a project, but I had to keep it to myself.
We did some great things together, she and I, but I was afraid to let anyone know.
They always questioned me. Is it just conversation or a set-up?
<b>Support for My Work</b>
I wanted to do more, but I got this attitude of 'Don't play in my pool'.
There was just no respect for what I do.
I'm not just smart in my subject.
I feel like I was there to babysit sometimes—don't they know what I can do?
Did they get how much I have to offer? Why don't they value me?
<b>Sharing</b>
I would want to help but sometimes I needed help too.
I have so much to give!
Why can't the teachers talk more? It's like they are afraid that we were talking.
I felt alone. I wanted to do things with my fellow teachers.
<b>Wanting to Work Without Fear</b>
I always felt judged.
It was a constant evaluation – no matter how mundane the topic.
I never felt like I had a friend.
I felt like I was constantly being watched and judged.
<b>Collegiality</b>
I wish I had work friends.
I wish they knew that I'm not just smart in my subject.
I have so many resources—not just babysitting services.
I wanted to do more but it was always resisted.
<b>Making a Difference</b>
I'm here because I want to be.
I love my job and I love these kids.
I really make a difference sometimes, I think.
<b>Growth</b>
I learned so much about myself!
I love that I was accepted for what I do.
I really have learned so much—about me and my friends.

## V. DISCUSSION

### A. Collaboration as Professional Growth

Although researchers have examined the impact on student achievement resulting from professional development using instructional collaboratives [1], [6]-[9], [2], there was a gap in the research connecting collaboration to a teacher's professional growth.

The primary goal of this research was to interpret how educators experienced a creative collaborative curriculum activity. The varied viewpoints offered by these participants provided the researcher with data and personal stories that exemplified the phenomenon of teacher collaboration in a

private, faith-based school context [1].

This study has added to the body of research on building a collaborative culture by identifying that the aspects of respect, inclusion, shared leadership, and trust are not separate and exclusive of one another, as former studies may suggest [76]. Rather, it is the sum-total of these elements that builds the culture of collaboration. Respect cannot happen without inclusion. Shared leadership develops as a result of inclusion and the end product of respect results from a culmination of them all. This sum-total builds the culture most conducive to collaboration.

In each interview, the teachers spoke about the collegiality that was established and how this collegiality fostered professional growth. In fact, the educators in the study were not motivated by extrinsic rewards at all, but instead found their motivation was in how they served others.

The participants found that making a difference addresses the need for autonomy and relatedness. None of the participants denied stressors that came with the collaboration. However, they were able to put them into perspective by having colleagues that served as buffers and problem-solvers and this collegiality helped them to feel safe in expressing their stressors. Stress and anxiety were replaced by plans and implementation, thus increasing their job satisfaction by providing the necessary intrinsic motivators.

Each teacher in this study indicated that there was insufficient time allotted during the school day for teacher planning time. In particular, they commented that formal curriculum meetings rarely focused on the curriculum among grade-level teachers but instead tended to focus on subject areas, which the teachers did not find useful. They also were adamant about the time to work together and talk as teachers. The lack of allotted time and subsequent follow-through on workshops indicated that more structured time was needed to implement effectively new knowledge and ideas acquired during these new learning experiences.

#### *B. Collaboration as Personal Growth*

The study provided several results that were unanticipated. The first was that teachers can experience successful, high-level collaboration in which they perceive a sense of satisfaction, mutuality, trust and growth. For the five middle school teachers in this study, their satisfactory experience with collaboration was teacher-initiated. When the participating teachers felt that they had power over their collaboration, they perceived the collaborative experience to be productive, in that they were able to engage in collegial learning [22], [1], [11], [32]. They were also more willing to question their existing approaches and try new ones [1], [72].

One of the more important observations from this study was the emphasis the faculty placed on both "being wanted" and on engagement with the students. The recurring themes were self-satisfaction at being wanted by their colleagues and the fact that students seemed to be more engaged in the learning when faculty and students were both engaged in the learning process [1].

The value of collaboration for all of the participants was

[27] found in the shared accountability that all of the teachers felt for student learning. The expectations of others helped establish a positive culture of interdependence that made all teachers feel like they were part of group-based decisions. Learning opportunities were sequenced for the teachers to facilitate their understanding of material being taught [74]. Through collaboration, the teachers discussed factors that affected the student's understanding of materials. Examples of these factors were: individual differences, developmental levels, and prior experiences [74]. Together the collaborators [1] used their expert knowledge of content to create sequenced learning opportunities for their students. These types of learning opportunities demonstrated innovative instruction intended to help both teachers and students develop a deeper, more lasting, and meaningful understanding of content and information.

Collaboration has the potential for creating a renewal in education by combining the strengths of two or more individuals in productive relationships that can positively influence student learning. Reference [74] explains, "Collaboration is critical among the specialists whose knowledge, skills, and caring come together to serve the whole child" (p.90). Moving toward powerful collaborative relationships involving greater intensity and commitment may propel greater learning for both the students and teachers. In learning together, the teachers felt a particular sense of accountability to their working partners. The power of collaboration lay in the socialization of teachers learning together and being exposed to diverse opinions and distinct teaching and communication styles. The collaboration involved teachers working as equal partners and it has the potential to transform education. Through collective efforts and social learning, exciting new learning experiences could be created that "teach students to participate in the process that makes possible the establishment of knowledge" [74, p.72].

#### *C. Implications for Future Research*

This study has implications for the expansion of teacher collaboration and the inclusion of the teacher in driving the collaboration. This study provided insight into the academic pathways, challenges, and triumphs of teachers experiencing an instructional collaborative. Because the literature is limited in teacher-driven collaborations, this study provided an opportunity for educators, researchers, and administrators to better understand the potential impact that current administratively-driven collaborations have on teachers' professional and personal growth.

This study focused on the teacher experience in the collaborative, yet there are several groups of studies that could be pursued based on the findings of the research undertaken here. Studies can be conducted across several departments or grade levels in both elementary and secondary education that would allow a comparison and contrast with this study. In addition, one could investigate the various stressors and motivations among staff members. The differences in perception as to stressors and motivators would add to the research on teacher motivation and the potential power

struggles within the collaboration. The use of surveys would allow for a quantitative comparison of how faculty members perceive collaboration based on their subject, grade-level, and stressor and motivators.

The differences in perception of definitions of collaboration could also generate new areas of research, including the dynamics of power within the collaboration, [1] seniority status of the teacher, and ethnic and racial diversity within different collaborative teams. It could also be interesting to study the rate of assimilation of novice teachers using teacher-driven collaboratives.

Studies could be established to determine if students make a difference in teacher-driven collaborations. Students in various grade levels, of various abilities, and of ethnic and racial backgrounds could be studied to determine whether teacher-driven collaboration bridges any gaps, increases test scores, or increases student self-efficacy. The design of this type of study would be qualitative as we would be judging perception based on learning environments [16], [58].

#### *D.Implications for Professional Practice*

The unique nature of this study's context has provided an opportunity to examine how private faith-based school leaders and teachers develop strong collaborative learning experiences for teachers. Private, faith-based schools have lacked consistency in the implementation and execution of collaborative professional learning [77]. The literature defined private schools as an institution that did not depend on "national or local government for financing its operations, does not rely on taxpayer contributions, and is governed by an independently elected board of trustees" [17], [20]. This study has helped school leaders within this context. It has demonstrated the need to foster a collaborative culture by providing time for teachers to work together as well as [1], [73]-[76] an atmosphere that does not pressure teachers to remediate or reform their work. By providing the necessary culture for collaboration, school leaders will build collegial and trusting relationships with all members of the school community. Through a culture conducive to collaboration, school leaders will begin to see the emergence of professional learning communities. These communities of practice will gather like-minded individuals together in a culture conducive to improving their craft.

In addition to this study's significance for school leaders, this study provided understanding of how a collaborative culture is built [1]. The researcher used the stories and experiences of the participants in order to underscore their perception about this phenomenon. The teachers interviewed offered a variety of experiences about their role in this collaborative. The participants agreed that their learning was enhanced both professionally and personally. They spoke about their need for a sense of trust, inclusion, shared leadership, and respect. They spoke about their sense of teamwork and time. This finding suggests that schools need to foster a culture conducive to collaboration. Schools need to allow teachers to develop their own professional development opportunities which create professional learning communities

which foster growth. This study has provided educators within this context the information needed to create collaborative cultures in a similar fashion to the participants in this study.

The micro-level significance of this study suggests that teachers viewed collaboration that they initiated as more valuable to them than those collaborations in their past that had been mandated or initiated by the school's administration. A perception of teacher ownership in the formation of the collaborative relationships seemed to promote teacher satisfaction with the experience [1]. The findings also suggest that teacher-initiated collaboratives that were more student-centered and involved a small group of teachers proved to be more beneficial to the teachers. Administratively-initiated collaboratives involved larger groups of teachers and were generally data-driven. The teachers in this study viewed smaller partnerships to be more satisfying than their previous, larger-group, collaboratives. A perception of teacher agency in the formation of the collaborative relationships seems to promote teacher satisfaction with the experience. This aligns with the findings of who observed that when individuals find "ways to satisfy their desire and to fulfill their interests without imposing on one another" [74, p.85], they develop a relationship of co-agency. It appears that for the teachers in this study, perceptions of mutuality and co-agency were best achieved with small groups rather than larger groups of teammates [1].

From the findings of this study, it appears that the participating teachers viewed collaboration that they initiated as more valuable to them than those collaborations in their past. In this collaborative experience, the teachers described a sense of mutuality, trust, and equality with their collaborative partners. Reference [33], [78] observed that when individuals find ways to satisfy their desires and to fulfill their interests without imposing on one another, they develop a relationship of collaboration. By encouraging teachers to initiate collaborative partnerships, and by including teachers in the formation of collaborative groups, administrators can promote a sense of teacher agency in the collaborative. This study aligns with the findings of [34], which found that the way in which individuals establish support helps to form their systems of norms, expectations, and values. This, in turn, improves job satisfaction and teacher practices are enhanced by this solid foundation due to clear goals, plans and expectations. Teachers are also more aware of their direction and the direction of their school. When teachers believe that they have the trust and respect of their colleagues, they are not afraid to share their leadership and expertise [1]. This promotes personal growth. This collaboration encouraged comradery and through this comradery; [1] the teachers' trust in one another deepened; they felt included in the decisions of the team; and the leadership was shared. This deepened the members' respect for one another and created a culture of collaboration.

Establishing support for the collaboration through trust, inclusion, shared leadership, and respect provided the participants with a solid base to develop strong support systems. This base allowed them to feel confident in their own

abilities and this allowed them to focus on the issues unique to their subject matter or students. Through this understanding, they moved forward to build a collaborative rooted in teacher personal growth [1].

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