PERCEPTIONS OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STAFF MEMBERS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STRUCTURED DIALOGUE PROTOCOLS FOR COLLABORATION

by

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Abstract

This phenomenological study was used to explore teachers' perceptions of structured dialogue for collaboration. Structured dialogue is defined as a conversation led by a facilitator, who provides direction, specific prompting, and sentence stems to have a group engage in dialogue. A review of the current scholarship on structured dialogue protocols brings to light how "deep" professional conversations in an educational context, collaboration, trust, and decision-making have an impact on discussions taking place in educational settings. A review of the literature revealed a lack of research that explores the reasons why deeper conversations between colleagues in education are not occurring often enough. This qualitative study explored the perceptions of elementary school staff members regarding their experiences engaging with structured dialogue protocols for collaboration. Through interviews using open-ended questions, participants shared their experiences using structured dialogue protocols, identified the specific structured dialogue protocols they found most and least effective, and provided recommendations for ways to potentially improve them. The findings reveal that individuals perceived structured dialogue protocols to be effective for collaboration by ensuring equitable sharing, enabling focused and attentive listening, establishing leadership roles to facilitate and structure the dialogue, and fostering collaborative problem-solving. This study suggests that structured dialogue protocols offer enhanced ways for educational colleagues to engage with one another in more meaningful and effective ways. This is an area of research that merits more attention and would be of benefit to those occupying leadership roles in schools.

Keywords: structured dialogue protocols, teacher collaboration, shared leadership

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Glossary

Structured Dialogue Protocols

Structured dialogue protocols are defined as conversations led by a facilitator, who provides direction, specific prompting and sentence stems to have a group engage in dialogue. Easton (2009) defines structured dialogue protocols as processes that "allow groups to explore ideas or problems and issues that surface during the day-to-day lives of educators" and reach a "deep understanding through dialogue that may lead to effective decision-making" (p. 8). Bushe (2010) proposes the term "organizational learning conversation" (p. 49) to describe a type of communication in which participants are aware of their own experiences and those of others.

Experience Cube Protocol (Bushe, 2010)

This protocol brings together the elements of observing, thinking, wanting, and feeling into one conversation. Bushe describes the *Experience Cube* as a "road map to your experience", and that it can be used for "deepening your awareness of your own experience and for focusing your curiosity into the experience of others" (p.93). To work through a specific problem or topic, participants are given the opportunity to contribute to the conversation by responding to the prompts outlined in the protocol. First, participants share their observations, which is what they have seen and heard about the issue. Then, they share their thoughts, including any beliefs, expectations or values relevant to the problem at hand. Next, participants share about their feelings towards what has been shared so far in the conversation. Lastly, participants are guided to clearly explain their needs concerning the results required to solve the issue. These steps can be followed by having participants taking notes before speaking, or by taking turns sharing to the group.

Peeling the Onion Protocol (Easton, 2009)

This protocol can be used to engage in a conversation when an individual needs to address an issue. This individual would provide the issue needing to be discussed using the protocol. The person should be prepared to share as much information as possible about the issue, and a conversation follows with the use of prompts. This protocol unravels the layers of an issue one step at a time. This protocol begins by having participants give their name and role to the group. One participant is then chosen to bring forward an issue to the group and describe it in detail. After this explanation is finished, those listening take notes about what was said. Next, all participants who took notes present their insights about the issue (a list of prompts can be used). Lastly, the individual who brought forward the issue at the beginning of the conversation shares their thoughts and the facilitator wraps the conversation up with a series of reflective questions.

SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) Protocol (Easton, 2009)

This protocol is a "strategic planning method that can be used to evaluate an organization's objectives or to analyze its problems" (Easton, p.74). This protocol was developed by Easton from Albert Humphrey's (2005) *Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT)* concept. The participants begin by presenting the problem they want to discuss in the form of a question, which can be answered during the conversation. Then, participants create a list of sub-questions to clarify the problem. All participants take notes about the problem chosen by the group. The rest of the discussion is led by the facilitator, who asks the group about the strengths available to help with the problem, the weaknesses connected to the problem, the possibilities of solutions to the problem, and the threats that could potentially get in the way of reaching a solution to the problem. Lastly, the facilitator should allow a few minutes for reflection and debriefing

Introduction

Many of my experiences as an early career teacher, and my appreciation for life-long learning have influenced me to further my educational journey through this inquiry. I have participated in several collaborative and community building initiatives with educators and students within my educational context, which have guided me to value belonging and authenticity. These values and experiences have also inspired me to be curious about what it takes for effective conversations to occur with colleagues and students. The reason behind this questioning is that it can often be difficult to engage in conversations effectively. As educators, we regularly face a number of barriers when it comes to having conversations, whether it be time, context, discussion topic, or those with whom we are interacting.

The connections I have built with students have enabled me to get a glimpse of the personal stories that shape who they are as learners and communicators. By incorporating open-mindedness and dialogue into my teaching and relationships, I have begun connecting with colleagues in more meaningful ways, which has led to my own development as an educator. I believe that nurturing personal growth in others and maintaining authentic connections is crucial for improvement. Planting seeds of compassion and nurturing growth in an educational setting is also a priority in becoming a successful leader. Humbled and encouraged in the exploration of my capacity as a teacher, I have begun to think about how I might work towards strengthening relationships and a sense of belonging to enhance the culture of collaboration within my school.

Adams et al. (2019) found that learning in a school community requires a “persistent mindset and daily practice, undertaken by generative leaders” (p. 92). The challenge lies in questioning our daily experiences to foster meaningful conversations, both personal and

professional. It is crucial to speak to the assumptions and preconceived notions that accompany our experiences. Sharing our stories allows others to get a sense of what you deal with as an educator and creates new perspectives about those experiences. Meaningful conversations are not easy to cultivate. Starting with impactful questions can ignite curiosity and critical reflection, which usually fuels and enhances the dialogue.

Safe and trusting relationships need to be established for collaboration to occur among colleagues, and individuals need positive environments in which they can grow together. Relationships need time to grow through sharing experiences, considering new perspectives and active listening. Fullan (2001) explains that "When the individual soul is connected to the organization, people become connected to something deeper—the desire to contribute to a larger purpose, to feel they are part of a greater whole, a web of connection" (p. 8). As individuals, we seek acknowledgment and validation of the efforts we put into an organization, and we want to know that our contributions have a positive impact on others. These interactions make us feel like we are an important part of the community.

Meaningful conversations also require diversity of thought. To many individuals' surprise, "we are more likely to learn something from people who disagree with us than we are from people who agree" (Fullan, 2001, p. 6). Although some discomfort comes with disagreement, change will not happen if we spend our time agreeing. Generative dialogue, which consists of having a "conversation to generate deep and original thought" (Isaacs, 1999, p. 96). plays an important role in assisting with change and decision-making. We need to foster the space in which educators can share their experiences in order to learn from each other. Isaacs (1999) also mentions that generative dialogue "invites teachers and leaders into an environment of empathy and trust, to critically reflect upon assumptions and discern unique insights related to

their professional selves with the explicit purpose of setting learning goals to improve instructional and leadership practice" (p. 96). Extreme vulnerability is involved in sharing our assumptions, and there is much work in getting to a place where this can happen comfortably. Yet, this process is important; it can bring individuals together, encourage them to consider an issue from a different perspective, and ignite a significant shift in the way a conversation is carried out.

Teacher collaboration is important. However, as Adams et al. (2019) explain, most teachers "are still teaching largely in isolation" (p. 119). So often, we have individual teachers working on individual projects. This does not promote sharing goals and working towards them as a team. Collaboration can contribute to what Kogler Hill (2019) call a "team leadership approach". The team leadership approach consists of interdependent members of a team with a common goal, who work collectively to achieve their objectives (Kogler Hill, 2019). Team leadership can create the feeling of belonging and familiarity within a work setting in which each educator works independently but also asks themselves: "What can we achieve together?"

The team leadership approach gives us a means to share our strengths and weaknesses and structure our conversations around creating improvements for both teachers and students. Parker (1990) noted that effective teamwork enables increased productivity, more effective use of resources, innovation, better decisions, and problem-solving. For some, it is the daunting task of trying this for the first time that represents the greatest hurdle. It takes a great deal of self-awareness to see our strengths and recognize what we bring to the table. Without acknowledging the value of our potential contributions, taking a team approach to decision making or implementing change does not always seem realistic. Through thoughtful conversations that

build rapport and collaboration, our first and most crucial role should be to build capacity in those with whom we work.

Theoretical Framework

I situate my research within Bohm's (1996) framework of generative dialogue. According to Bohm (1996), generative dialogue is a "multi-faceted process, looking well beyond conventional ideas of conversational parlance and exchange" (p. 1). Generative dialogue consists of "common participation" (p. 7-8), in which participants work together rather than against one another. Generative dialogue is valuable in effective communication because "many find it very hard to communicate unless there is a set purpose, or unless somebody is leading it" (Bohm, 1996, p. 7-8). Generative dialogue can be used as a lens to explore how teachers engage in dialogue within collaborative experiences. Petta et al. (2019) define generative dialogue as "a powerful type of meaningful collegial interaction that empowers participants to stay engaged, sharing trust and mutual respect, while working towards a common goal" (p. 59).

Through my research, I sought to discover which structured dialogue protocols are most and least effective for collaboration, and how educators perceive their value. The specific structured dialogue protocols I used in this research included the "*Experience Cube"* (Bushe, 2010) and the "*Peeling the Onion"* (Easton, 2009) protocols. Additionally, the "*SWOT"* protocol, developed by Easton (2009) from Albert Humphrey's (2005) SWOT concept, which originated at Stanford University was also used in this study (see Appendices B, C and D for visual representations of steps within each protocol).

Bushe (2010) proposes the term "organizational learning conversation" (p. 49) to describe a type of communication in which participants are aware of their own experiences and those of others. Organizational learning conversations allow for discussions to occur in a way

that avoids some of the typical negative patterns that may arise in unstructured interactions within an organization. Some examples of these patterns include, dealing with conflict, communicating within a hierarchy, decision-making and problem-solving. A specific structured dialogue protocol put forward by Bushe (2010) is called *The Experience Cube* (p. 91), which brings together the elements of observing, thinking, wanting, and feeling into one conversation. Bushe (2010) describes the *Experience Cube* protocol as a "road map to your experience", and that it can be used for "deepening your awareness of your own experience and for focusing your curiosity into the experience of others" (p. 93).

Easton (2009) also puts forward several approaches for engaging with structured dialogue protocols. Easton explains that structured dialogue protocols are an exercise groups can use to reach a "deep understanding through dialogue that may lead to effective decision-making" (p. 8). Easton has shared a modified version of a protocol referred to as *Peeling the Onion*, which originates from the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF). It is a protocol that can be used to engage in a conversation when an individual needs to address an issue. The individual should be prepared to share as much information as possible about the issue, and a conversation follows with the use of prompts.

An additional example from Easton (2009) is called the *SWOT* protocol, (p. 74). It is a "strategic planning method that can be used to evaluate an organization's objectives or to analyze its problems" (Easton, 2009, p. 74). This protocol encompasses the four following dimensions: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. As participants go through the *SWOT* protocol, they are given the opportunity to learn more about the problem presented and the resources available to resolve it.

Situating Myself in the Research

I am an early career teacher working in a Francophone school. Over the past five years since beginning my career as a teacher, this context has presented unique experiences and challenges, such as teaching in French, which is often students' second or third language. Throughout my university and professional career, I have interacted with a variety of individuals who have brought forward new ideas and new challenges to my practice. As a result of these interactions, I have been exposed to the impact a strong leader can have on their community. The Master of Education program has allowed me to reflect on my current practices and has created a context in which I have been able to enhance my capacities as a learner and leader. As teachers, we encourage our students to further their education and make room for continuous growth, and this program has allowed me to do so.

In my search for a community of learning and collaborating in my school, I began to wonder if all voices were being heard equitably. I constantly face experiences in which the voices of educators at every level should be considered before decisions are made, but many voices often remain silenced. While I understand that some choose to be involved in change and decision-making while others do not, I am often left wondering how to meaningfully and effectively include a diversity of perspectives into conversations. I began to think more deeply about the potential of generative dialogue as a means of fostering more purposeful collaboration and a team leadership approach in my school. Specifically, I began to wonder if structured dialogue protocols would make a difference in our approach to communication, and whether they could potentially enhance the culture of collaboration within my context.

Within the *Leading and Mentoring Across Professional Learning Communities* course, many lectures were facilitated using structured dialogue protocols, most of which were designed

by Easton (2009) and Bushe (2010). These protocols were introduced to demonstrate that they can be used with a variety of individuals and groups within different contexts and for multiple purposes. The protocols implement probing questions into discussions with colleagues and can be used in a variety of professional conversations (Easton, 2009). After participating in discussions led by a facilitator using these structured dialogue protocols, I was inspired by an idea for my capstone research project. It became clear that I wanted to explore how these structured dialogue protocols would be considered in other educational settings, and more specifically the one in which I had been working since the beginning of my teaching career. Thus, I used the structured dialogue protocols from the course and adapted them in order to create French versions to use with my own colleagues. I chose the *Experience Cube* (Bushe, 2010), the *Peeling the Onion* (Easton, 2009), and the *SWOT* (Easton, 2009) protocols to frame three collaborative conversations, that I hoped to facilitate with my staff members.

During the fall of 2020, I approached my colleagues about trying some of the structured dialogue protocols I had learned in the Master of Education program. I explained to them that it was something I found interesting and likely beneficial for our team, and that I could potentially use this experience to move forward with my research. I reassured them that no information or data from the collaborative sessions would be used or collected for the purposes of this research, but that staff members who engaged in these sessions would be invited to participate in a study in early 2021 focused on exploring their experiences with the structured dialogue protocols.

I facilitated three collaborative sessions during the fall of 2020 with three staff members who volunteered to participate. Given the Francophone setting of my school, all collaborative sessions with staff took place in French. In addition, the sessions took place with strict adherence to COVID-19 physical distancing measures and school district regulations to ensure the safety of

all participants. The first session was used to discuss how discipline was approached in the school, using the *Peeling the Onion* protocol. The *Experience Cube* protocol was used in the second session to discuss student engagement with the French language, an issue all participants felt was a priority. Lastly, the *SWOT* protocol was used to facilitate a discussion regarding staff well-being and mental health.

As the facilitator of these sessions, I endeavored to establish and maintain trust with participants taking part in the three collaborative sessions. Structured dialogue protocols consisted of a new and unfamiliar approach to collaboration for participants. Therefore, it was important for me to create an environment in which each of the three participants could interact effectively and comfortably. The relationship I hoped to construct between myself as a researcher and my participants, was one of belonging and authenticity. These are the epistemological values I have continuously referred to during my research, and they have acted as a driving force in creating connections with participants, in being transparent about my intentions, and in building relationships through meaningful conversation.

Purpose

The purpose of this research study was to investigate how teachers perceived their experiences engaging with structured dialogue protocols and which protocols they found to be the most and least effective in generating meaningful collaboration. Nelson et al. (2010) explain that collaboration in education is important, and that there is a need to shift from superficial conversations to effective dialogue. The use of structured dialogue protocols is an effective approach in enabling educators to engage in the shift necessary for meaningful collaboration, as they can be framed to address specific purposes related to teaching and learning. Unfortunately, as this approach is fairly new, there is a lack of research about the use of structured dialogue

protocols in educational settings, and how they can be implemented, practiced and adapted to fit the needs of diverse contexts.

Context

This study took place in a small elementary school in the Lower Mainland. The school is one of 37 schools in the Francophone School District (Conseil scolaire francophone) that are located across British Columbia. Most staff members speak French as their first language and only speak English as a second or additional language in the community outside of the school. Being the only French language school in the city, professional development and collaboration opportunities are less accessible for teachers in this school, many of whom often feel a sense of isolation. The majority of teachers have been in the same building for over twenty years and teach within the comfort of their classrooms. The staff members have a deep level of respect for professional autonomy and individual teaching practices. Prior to this study, the staff at the school were not familiar with structured dialogue protocols for collaboration.

Research Questions

The overarching questions of this study are as follows: (a) What are the perceptions of elementary school staff members on the effectiveness of structured dialogue protocols for collaboration? (b) Which structured dialogue protocol was perceived as most and least effective in generating meaningful collaboration for participants? (c) How did participants perceive their experiences engaging with the structured dialogue protocols?

Scholarly Significance

This research contributes to the body of scholarship focusing on the use of specific structured dialogue protocols in educational settings. The results of this study will enhance our understanding of the benefits of structured dialogue protocols for collaboration and provide insights regarding what educators need to engage more effectively in collegial conversation. These insights can support those in positions of leadership to facilitate more meaningful and collaborative dialogue in educational contexts.

Literature Review

Research over the past few decades suggests that collaboration is inherently valued and beneficial in today's school cultures. According to Cordingley et al. (2005), collaboration has brought forward benefits such as greater confidence in teachers, motivation in their ability to make a difference in student learning, enthusiasm for working collaboratively, the commitment to making changes in teaching practice, and an inclination towards new experiences. As a result, many new approaches to collaboration, such as structured dialogue, are making their way into educational contexts, as suggested by Easton (2009) and Bushe (2010). The following literature review explores the concepts of deep conversation, trust, decision-making, and collaboration and examines the role each concept plays in the success of effective structured dialogue protocols in educational settings.

Deep Conversation

In many schools today, teachers gather to discuss their daily challenges and successes. Some educators may engage in critical dialogue with their colleagues, while others simply participate in friendly collaborative conversations, which may lack in depth and critical reflection. In an analysis of discussion sequences between teachers and their colleagues, Kvam

(2017) notes that in these types of collaborative conversations, “teachers both help and support each other, but they fail to challenge each other’s pedagogical stance or to strive to achieve reflective dialogue” (p. 709). Kvam (2017) further explains that “it is not enough for teachers to exchange ideas for alternative teaching methods” (p. 698). Nelson et al. (2010) specify that “intentional and transparent steps are needed to shift from congenial to collegial conversations” (p. 177). They further point out that “a traditional school culture of congeniality and teachers’ inexperience with evidence-based dialogue” (p. 176) hold teachers back from taking part in deep conversations. Deep conversation is becoming more relevant in a time when there is much energy being channeled into change and innovation. It is clear in the literature that there is a need for teacher conversations to include more than just sharing anecdotes and stories from the classroom.

Deep conversations between educators are said to be brought about by the approach of *generative dialogue*, as suggested by Petta et al. (2019), to demonstrate the act of moving beyond conventional conversations. They describe *generative dialogue* as a “more comprehensive, purposeful and integrated practice of conversation” (p. 53). Kvam (2017) further explains that collaboration “must include experimentation, as well as a common identification of problems and their solutions” (p. 698) within professional conversations. In a study on the topic of critical friend groups as a framework for professional conversations, Kuh (2016) noted that “the combination of collaboratively sharing work and engaging in inquiry-based conversations seems to instill a sense of commitment not only to the workplace, but also to the work of teaching” (p. 296).

To improve the progression of conversation to dialogue between teachers, dialogue needs to be structured for specific purposes related to teaching and learning. Nelson et al. (2010) define

the role teacher leaders hold in introducing "shifts in teacher talk" by guiding teachers' conversations towards "substantive and specific dialogue about teaching and learning" (p. 178). However, if this shift is to remain sustainable, Nelson et al. (2010) note that "all teachers must contribute to deep conversations grounded in a cycle of questioning, reflecting on evidence, and taking action" (p. 178). Participants from a study by Trimble et al. (1998) presented the metaphor "to work as one" (p. 8) to illustrate their view of leadership tasks within a collaborative group. The authors explain that leadership tasks are crucial in demonstrating support for one another within a group, having "equal partners, sharing and working together" (Trimble et al., 1998, p. 8). As educators, we must foster an environment for our own continued learning, but we must also participate in dialogue that provokes self-reflection, problem-solving, and equitable sharing. When educators are empowered and supported in facilitating such conversations and implementing the use of structured dialogue protocols for collaboration, teachers often emerge as leaders in many contexts.

Trust

Whether collaboration occurs in familiar contexts or not, it is necessary to establish a foundation of trust and care within professional conversations. In several studies, trust has been an important indicator of successful collaboration and discussion. In a study by Bergman et al. (2012), the development of trust in groups of colleagues emerged with repeated interaction and the creation of cohesion within the team, suggesting that collaboration does not happen without the presence of relationships. Similarly, Kvam (2018) explains that deeper conversations or "exploratory talk" is based on the establishment of trust within a group, therefore learning happens within those interactions (p. 707).

Kuh (2016) argues that tangible tools, such as those brought forward by Wenger (1998) be used to structure conversations between teachers to build trust within groups. As Kuh (2016) explains, “protocols inspire a unique social dialect and contain specific language that shapes a speaker’s voice and the responses of others” (p. 304). Wenger (1998) refers to a “repertoire of a community of practice”, which consists of “routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted” to engage in collaboration (p. 83). Effective communities of practice can be sustained by building mutual engagement and, having shared routines and common goals within the group.

Trust among colleagues is not acquired immediately. Time is required for building relationships between individuals, enabling effective dialogue, and promoting healthy decision-making practices within the team. Bergman et al. (2012) point out that when teachers work together on a short-term basis, lack of time is an impediment to building trust, and can bring forward challenges with collaboration. In another study, Nelson et al. (2010) used sample questions to explore collaboration in critical friend groups. Teachers reported that digging too deep within conversations brings out differences in beliefs and values, which can create mistrust within the group. As we navigate how to best collaborate and engage with colleagues, it is crucial to honor the inevitable differences in perspective and values educators hold.

Decision-making

Decision-making is considered a fundamental component in educational settings according to the groups of professionals observed and interviewed in a study by Borg and Drange (2019). They suggest that shared decision-making requires an organized context for collaboration, and that there is a need for openness and mutual respect within the group. Likewise, Acker-Hocevar and Touchton (1999) observe that school improvement is realized

through empowering teachers by having them participate in decision-making within the school. Pugach and Johnson (1995) found that involving teachers in decision-making within a school influences the way educators understand today's challenges in education. The decision-making process takes place within schools and empowers educators to take greater responsibility within their contexts. All three studies indicate the concrete and positive outcomes of teachers participating in decision-making within educational teams.

However, other studies highlight the downfalls and barriers that come along with decision-making. Bergman et al. (2012) explain that when conflict and low productivity are present in schools, it may be associated with teachers' lack of satisfaction with their work and a decline in the quality of decision-making. Bergman et al. (2012) highlight the leadership behaviors that play a role in decision-making within teams, such as task-, change-, relations-, and spanning-oriented. Similarly, a study by Gerpott et al. (2019) digs deep into these aspects of leadership, as they consider task-, change-, and relations-oriented verbal behaviors in leadership to be ever changing and evolve throughout the lifecycle of a team's work together. Gerpott et al. (2019) conducted their research using the "Interaction Analytical Approach" to study emergent leadership in self-directed teams. This study explains the relational and evolving nature of emergent leadership within self-managed teams. An external observer was implemented and applied a behavioral code to the participants' statements during their work together amid various projects and decision-making initiatives. The dynamic nature of emergent leadership demonstrates that behaviors characterized as valuable in self-directed teams can differ according to the context of each team's project. Gerpott et al. (2019) note that emergent leadership has often focused on the specific personality traits of the emergent leader, whereas this study considers that emergent leadership results from the impact of the dynamics in communication,

suggesting that emergent leadership results from the interactions between the participants in a self-managed team.

Nelson et al. (2010) explain that the process of exploration within teacher discussion needs to make room for more decision-making. Acker-Hocevar and Touchton (1999) point out their findings of teachers' negative perceptions of decision-making, noting that "teachers simply go through the motions of decision-making, but none take it seriously" (p. 11). Teachers simply want to avoid "being labeled as a person who is not in appearance of moving in the direction of the district" (p. 11). Many factors hinder the decision-making process for teachers. Although good intentions may be established, the productivity of the decision-making process can be hindered. In an assessment of team functioning by Trimble and Peterson (1998), focus groups and questionnaires show that one of the participating teams "demonstrated high relationship behaviors and care for students, with little closure and few decisions" (p. 5).

Collaboration

For meaningful collaboration to occur, structured dialogue protocols and learning must be embedded into the collaborative process. Within observations of teacher collaboration, Kvam (2017) notes that discussions between teachers do not always reach full learning potential. In other words, teachers may include topics of teaching and learning on the agenda for collaboration, but discussions within the collaboration consist of confirming the perspectives of others. Kvam (2017) explains that a persistent pattern within teacher collaboration is that teachers listen to the anecdotes of their colleagues without the critical dialogue that would challenge their thinking. This further highlights the need for structured dialogue protocols within collaboration in the interest of deepening the interactions between teachers who work in the same building.

Other studies explored collaboration between teachers in different schools. For example, Rempe-Gillen (2018) conducted interviews of participants who engaged in collaboration with educators outside of their context. The study found that to establish effective collaboration with educators working in different schools, "the cohesive bonds and relevant factors of the group need to shift from geographical location and/or shared pupils" (p. 359). In other words, for effective collaboration to occur between educators from different schools, it needs to move towards more in-depth conversations about how to support students. The author posits that collaborating outside of the school building offers an array of new opportunities.

Collaboration can take place between teachers and other professions, as evidenced in Borg and Drange's (2019) study of interprofessional collaboration. However, collaboration in these contexts has other limitations. Through interviews and observations, the researchers note that within interprofessional collaboration, "double work and compartmentalization occurred rather than collaboration and innovation" (Borg & Drange, 2019, p. 261). Whether teachers are collaborating in familiar contexts or not, the literature reveals a potential for structured dialogue protocols to enhance conversations between individuals.

Research Methodology

Along with being an educator and shaping student learning, I value belonging and authenticity. I have an ontological belief that meaningful learning happens by building relationships and community and by sharing perspectives and stories with other educators. The conversations I have had and the experiences I have shared with other educators have contributed to my identity as a teacher, and I believe the future professional relationships that will be formed

in my career will continue to do so. Transparency about our experiences and challenges as educators can engender significant conversations and inform our practice.

Phenomenological Approach

This inquiry is situated in the constructivist paradigm. I used a phenomenological research methodology to gather insights into staff members' perceptions of their experiences with the phenomenon of structured dialogue protocols for collaboration. As van Manen (2017) explains, "phenomenology is concerned with meaning and meaningfulness rather than informational content" (p. 814). When using phenomenology as a research method, the research "proceeds through an inceptual process of reflective wondering, deep questioning, attentive reminiscing, and sensitively interpreting the primal meanings of human experiences" (van Manen, 2017, p. 819).

Data Sources

Prior to recruitment of participants for this study, consent to conduct this research was granted by the University of the Fraser Valley's Human Research Ethics Board (HREB Protocol No: 100572, see Appendix A) and the local school district. Participants were chosen based on purposeful sampling, among the staff members who participated in the collaborative sessions in the fall of 2020. These individuals were invited to engage in a subsequent individual interview in early 2021 to share perceptions of their experiences with the use of structured dialogue protocols during the collaborative sessions. A letter of invitation describing the project and what participants could expect was sent by email. This email communication also included a consent form that provided participants with information about the purpose, procedures, potential benefits and risks, confidentiality, and results of the study. Three staff members from the school

volunteered to participate in the collaborative sessions, and all agreed to be interviewed afterwards. They agreed to be interviewed and participate in the study by signing the consent form and sending it back via email. Anonymization was carried out by describing participants using pseudonyms they chose and information they provided. Dissemination of the research study occurred in four ways. A report and presentation of the research was provided to the University of the Fraser Valley's Teacher Education Department in relation to the Master of Education program. The research will be kept in the University of the Fraser Valley's research repository. There is a possibility that results from the research will be shared with colleagues during education conferences, and copies of the final report will be shared with participants.

Data Tools

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews to examine participants' perceptions of the structured dialogue protocols for collaboration. Interviews (see Appendix E for interview questions) and data collection occurred in January 2021, after a two-week winter break, giving participants time to reflect on their experiences during the collaborative sessions that occurred approximately one month before their interviews. Open-ended questions were used in the interviews to probe emerging opinions and perceptions. By using open-ended questions during the interviews, space was created for participants to share their full experience of the structured dialogue protocols that they had engaged in during the collaborative sessions. As the researcher, I designed the interview questions in both French and in English, but interviews were conducted in French. Multiple drafts of the interview questions were written to ensure questions were formulated in a way that would gather the most accurate insights. In the case of the first interview, the responses to the interview questions were brief, lacked in detail and were not comprehensive enough to capture the full lived experience of the participant. It was necessary to

restart this interview, and to use follow-up questions to support the participant in giving detailed responses and creating the conditions for meaning to emerge during the interview.

To adhere to the COVID-19 health and safety regulations, the interviews took place using Zoom, an online platform familiar to the participants. Interviews were digitally voice recorded and transcribed using Sonix, an online program which allows users to complete transcripts in several different languages. The interview transcripts were then translated from French to English using translating programs such as Google Translate and Word Reference. I verified the findings with the participants to establish if their experiences and perceptions were understood correctly. Member checks (Creswell & Poth, 2017) were completed by sending each participant the French transcript of their interview to review and revise for accuracy (first-level member check). Participants were then sent the translation of their interview transcript and any direct quotes used in the final report (second-level member check).

Data Analysis

Data analysis and representation in a phenomenological study are outlined succinctly by Creswell and Poth (2017). The first step in this phenomenological data analysis was to describe my personal experiences with the phenomenon. I used the process of bracketing to remove my bias from the research findings (Creswell & Poth, 2017). I attempted to set aside all preconceived notions about the phenomenon to understand the experiences of the participants in the study (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenon consisted of using structured dialogue protocols to facilitate conversations during three collaborative sessions. My experience with this phenomenon was that most individuals taking part in the structured dialogue protocols were hesitant at the beginning, as it is an unfamiliar approach to collaboration, and there were perhaps

fears of disrupting the intended structure of the dialogue. However, the structure of the dialogue permitted each participant to contribute equally, which was empowering as well as providing significance to each voice. Although I thought the framework of the protocols would most likely enhance the collaborative sessions, I was aware of this bias before engaging in, and it was important for me to put aside my preconceptions.

Creswell and Poth (2017) note that an important next step of phenomenology is to pay particular attention to participants' "significant statements", which provide clarity in relation to their specific experiences with the phenomenon being studied, in this case the structured dialogue protocol used for collaboration (p. 77). I developed a list of significant statements from the data collected during the analysis of the interview transcripts. In order to do so, I used a technique referred to as "horizontalization" by Moustakas (1994). I made a list of all statements applying to the inquiry and gave equal value to all statements. I collected significant statements by taking descriptive notes while reading through the transcripts of the interviews. As Wolcott (1994) suggests, I highlighted specific information in these descriptions. I identified codes, then classified them using first-level process coding, which is referred to as process coding (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Transcripts and quotes were used in this type of coding, focusing on the action (gerund) verbs in the interview transcripts (see Table 2). For example, participants referred to actions such as "sharing, listening, establishing, and working together" to explain their perceptions of the collaboration facilitated by the structured dialogue protocols. This analysis process provided a timeline of action that indicated cause and effect within the phenomenon.

I completed second-level coding by grouping significant statements into broader units of information. Themes, patterns, and key concepts were chosen within the codes extracted during

the first-level coding. I kept track of codes within transcripts by highlighting words, quotes, and phrases, classifying them into codes, and displaying them into "code frequency tables" (See Appendices F and G). I created "clusters of meaning" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 201) by grouping statements into categories and removing repetition. As recommended by Moustakas (1994), a textural description of the phenomenon experienced by the participants was then created. This structural description of the phenomenon provided detail in "seeking all possible meanings, looking for divergent perspectives, and varying the frames of reference about the phenomenon or using imaginative variation" (p. 313). Creswell and Poth (2017) explain that the last step in data analysis and representation consists of writing a textural description that captures the "essence" of the experience and represents the culminating aspect of the phenomenological study. This is where the researcher "explains "what" the participants experienced with the phenomenon and "how" they experienced it" (p. 201).

To identify categories from the data, I began by analyzing the English versions of the interview transcripts through first and second-level coding. When reviewing the transcripts, I noted the presence of subtle differences between meaning when translating, and I wanted to ensure that I captured the essence of the meaning of what each participant said. Thus, an important second part in the process of analysis and coding for this study included reviewing the original raw data in French and comparing it to the data in English. Through this process, I observed the nuances of the language and the translations. During this time, I created frequency tables in English and in French to keep track of overlapping and differing perceptions between the participants. These nuances sometimes required using two words instead of one when establishing some of the first-level codes. For example, words such as "discuss" in English, and "discuter" in French are not used in the same way, although they are a direct translation of one

another and share the same definition in both languages. In this case, direct translations were not always used when establishing codes and categories, despite their similarities. An alternative word, “talking” was added to accompany the word “discussing” in the English frequency table to better suit the context in which it had been said during the interview. To make sure the true meaning of participants’ perceptions was not altered, I established a code with two words instead of one (Talking/Discussing). Throughout the process of first and second-level coding, it was crucial to keep in mind the inevitable differences between original and translated data and to be able to address the nuanced nature of the translation that occurred during data analysis. This was a way of bracketing any biases I may have inadvertently imposed on the data through translation.

Managing Bias

Miles et al. (2014) bring forward a list of checks for researcher bias. I managed bias by making my intentions clear for participants. I approached participants with transparency regarding the purpose and theme of the research, how information was collected, and what was to be done with the information. During the collaborative sessions, which took place before the interviews, it was essential to take on the role of facilitator in a neutral manner and without any pre-existing assumptions. As Creswell and Poth (2017) assert, to adequately report on participants’ view of a phenomenon, the process of bracketing is used so the researcher can remove their bias from their research findings. Field notes were shared with a colleague and supervisor for this study. I kept inquiry questions firmly in mind while doing research as to remain focused during data collection and analysis. Participant feedback was also used to manage bias. First and second-level member checks were undertaken in attempt to maintain clarity of the interview transcripts and the translations of any direct quotes. Each participant was asked the same questions during their interview. In addition, I kept track of my ideas,

assumptions, questions, and biases of the phenomenon by writing in a separate journal, and by writing directly on transcripts to locate where my assumptions came from. I also used this journal to record if any early analysis of one interview transcript impacted my later analysis of other transcripts. I wrote in my journal after each interview and after the analysis of each transcript. After conducting and analyzing each interview, I made sure to go back to my data several times. I took the time to write reflections from participants' perceptions shared during their interview, which allowed me to set aside any beliefs I held and verify that I was not making assumptions about what participants had shared. It was crucial to take the steps towards staying true to the participants' responses.

I began this research with the belief that the protocols would make a noticeable difference in the way people engage in collaborative conversations. I hold this belief because structured dialogue protocols are formatted in such a way that voices can be heard equitably and listening can happen more thoroughly than in a typical meeting. I chose the structured dialogue protocols as a focus for my research, as I saw value in them and their potential implementation within my team of educators. I held the belief that participants would find the structured dialogue protocols helpful. I recognized that introducing a new approach to how individuals engage in conversation could change the collaborative dynamic that is currently present within this team of educators. Because the participants are my colleagues, my implicit bias comes from my familiarity with these individuals, my knowledge of their values and their collaborative styles, as well as the professional experiences I have shared with them. Despite my positive feelings regarding the protocols, I needed to acknowledge to myself that not everybody would necessarily feel this way about them.

After first and second-level coding of the data, there were some surprises, which challenged my assumptions. For example, I assumed that because the participants had spent several months learning and working with various online platforms prior to this research study due to the COVID-19 pandemic and working from home, there would be some ease navigating the interview process on an online platform. On the contrary, it was evident that the formal setting of the Zoom platform for interviewing impacted the level of comfort participants had being interviewed, despite being explicit with participants about what to expect prior to the interviews. It was clear that because participants were being recorded, there was more emphasis on avoiding any mistakes during their interview. In the case of this study, the original data was translated from French to English. I assumed this process would be straight forward, but this assumption was challenged when I realized that there was a potential that some data could be misrepresented through translation. In order to manage my bias through the translation process, participants were shown and given the opportunity to change the translations of their interview transcripts. I went through the process of analyzing the data with process-coding using the English transcripts, then a second time using the French transcripts. During this process, I shared my translations and analysis of the interview transcripts with the supervisor for this research, who speaks English and French. This presented another opportunity for me to monitor my biases.

Strength of Study

To ensure the strength of the study was maintained, I applied Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) *Triple Crises of Representation, Legitimation, and Praxis*. I applied the aspect of representation in this study to humanize participants, based on how they requested to be described in the writing. This was done by using follow-up questions after the interview to ask participants how they wanted to be described in the final report. Also, the interview questions

enabled participants to define important terms relating to the study, such as collaboration, in their own words. I implemented legitimation by using direct quotes as authentic evidence of how participants perceived the phenomenon. Open-ended questions during the interviews gave participants the opportunity to respond without any limitations to the information they could share about their experiences. Praxis refers to how research findings were used and how they could potentially benefit others. The findings from this research have the potential to inform the school community regarding how to best support staff in productive, collaborative dialogue.

Results

The following section represents the key findings from this study based on data from the interviews. For the sake of respecting confidentiality, each of the three participants was given a pseudonym: “Aimy”, “Mathilde”, and “Éloise”. Aimy has been working with students from Kindergarten to Grade eight as an Educational Assistant for twenty-two years. Mathilde has been working with students as an Educational Assistant for twenty-four years. Éloise has been a classroom teacher for eight years.

Collaboration was defined by participants as a means of working cooperatively with others, listening, exchanging ideas, communicating, and arriving at a collective achievement. All participants shared their perceptions of the effectiveness of structured dialogue protocols for collaboration during their interviews. The data from my study reveals four important perceptions of the staff members regarding the benefits of the structured dialogue protocols. The participants reported that the structured dialogue protocols ensured equitable sharing, enabled focused and attentive listening, facilitated and structured dialogue, and fostered collaborative problem-solving.

Ensuring Equitable Sharing

Participants believed the protocols were helpful in ensuring equitable sharing. In their responses, the participants noted that the structured dialogue protocols allowed everyone in the group to share their ideas and perspectives equally, which in some cases contributed to better decision-making. Mathilde said that "it was clear, right from the start that everyone was going to talk, what our roles were and when each person will get to speak." Participants shared their appreciation for the structured dialogue protocols. For example, when referring to one of the structured dialogue protocols that took place during the collaborative sessions, Aimy noted that "We all listened to others' opinions. The people involved took turns sharing their ideas. We each took the time to listen to others. A collective decision was made." When referring to a collaboration that was structured rather than open-ended that she had previously participated in, Aimy explained that an individual spoke to a specific issue, then other individuals responded. The individual who spoke initially responded to what was said and then shared their conclusions. When referring to another collaborative session, Mathilde shared that the structured dialogue protocol enabled participants to "give their opinion, to share ideas and to listen to others' opinions." Éloise shared that she felt it was necessary to have a difference in perspective, as collaboration is not successful when participants have too much in common:

> We all agreed every time, or pretty often at least, we expressed the same problems. When we have discussions and collaborate, it's having people with different ideas and different problems. So, if someone does not have that same problem, it's maybe because they've found a solution. Maybe reflecting on it together can help, but if we all have the same problem, it's because we haven't found a solution. I think maybe it's because we're all

too similar and there wasn't enough diversity within the group for it to be helpful (Éloise).

While it is important to provide individuals with equal opportunities to share during collaboration, disagreement, or difference in opinions cannot be avoided. The structured dialogue protocols allowed for all voices to be heard and created the space for differing perspectives to be heard and considered.

Enabling Focused and Attentive Listening

Responses from participants demonstrated that the structured dialogue protocols enabled more focused and attentive listening during collaboration. The format of the structured dialogue protocols allowed participants to be fully present during the conversations that occurred during each of the collaborative sessions. Within the *Peeling the Onion* and the *Experience Cube* protocols, participants took turns speaking, which reduced the distracting dynamics that can occasionally occur within collaboration, such as interrupting, cutting-in to the conversation, or worrying about getting the chance to speak. The *Peeling the Onion* and the *SWOT* protocols allowed participants to take notes while others were speaking, which they found to be helpful in demonstrating more effective listening skills. For example, Éloise stated that using these protocols was beneficial because "people feel like they were listened to, and heard, and they can participate." Aimy noted that "the participants did a good job sharing, observing, and listening to those who were taking notes and sharing them when the topic was brought forward." Mathilde explained how taking notes while listening allowed them to be more mindful about what was being said: "I think it works well because with note taking, we can better remember others' ideas." Additionally, Mathilde explains a positive aspect of the collaborative sessions, as they

were structured in such a way that participants could feel comfortable sharing and engaging in the dialogue:

> We recalled three very important topics, all areas requiring improvement in our school. We all agreed to talk about a given topic. The sessions were well structured and we were given the topics in advance. It was very pleasant to work, as there was no tension during the conversations (Mathilde).

Also, Éloise demonstrated interest in trying the protocols in a context other than the collaborative sessions: "I would like to see how they can be implemented, like in a staff meeting or at another time. It would also be interesting to see." Evidently, participants noticed the effective listening skills demonstrated by others during the conversations. The structured dialogue protocols provided a framework in which those skills could contribute to the effectiveness of the collaboration.

Facilitating and Structuring Dialogue

Participants' responses indicated that they perceived the need for leadership roles within collaboration, while recognizing that these roles are not necessarily easy to take on. The three structured dialogue protocols enhanced leadership roles within a group by defining an individual who would facilitate the collaboration. Having a leader enabled participants to establish a plan, a topic, and a common goal for the meeting, which made the conversation and collaboration more structured, and more effective. As Éloise said:

> I think that there often needs to be someone who is like the motor, the leader who takes care of things and brings people back, because things often go all over the place. I think having a leader, without officially choosing them, having a common goal, that there is someone who takes charge, is good. When nobody does it, I feel like we go around in

> circles and nothing happens. That's what I mean by leader, bringing people back when they get scattered, whether it's with the time or with the topic (Éloise).

All participants spoke about the importance of having someone act in the capacity of the leader and the many responsibilities associated with the role. They discussed how these "leading" actions contributed to effective functioning in collaboration. For example, Aimy shared thoughts regarding the role of the leader: "Someone is more of a leader compared to the others. So, they might gather ideas from others and then try to synthesize them, all while respecting what others are saying." The facilitator's role was to ensure that the steps within the structured dialogue protocol were being followed. This role was also important because the facilitator in the group helped to ensure that the protocols were being followed correctly. Shared leadership presented itself when any participant demonstrated a readiness to be a leader in the conversation. Also, Mathilde mentioned that the protocol framework made it easier to stay on topic and provided greater clarity: "I like it better when collaboration is structured, and we get to talk about what is essential about the topic." Other participants also mentioned that having a well-established topic ahead of time or establishing the topic during one of the steps in the structured dialogue protocols was beneficial. Additionally, Éloise brought forward an important point about establishing and maintaining a shared objective and working towards having every participant contribute to reach that goal: "There needs to be a common goal achieved and each person does their part…there needs to be interaction between people."

An improvement to the protocols suggested by one participant was to share or rotate the role of the facilitator. Aimy expressed views regarding the importance of sharing the leadership roles within collaboration: "Maybe if we would have each taken a turn being the leader. Maybe it would have been good to do a rotation for that role. It's important to give each person the role of

the leader to facilitate a discussion." The structured dialogue protocols promoted organized and structured conversations. Also, the presence of a leader to hold others accountable added to the positive functioning of the collaboration.

Fostering Collaborative Problem-solving

The role of the leader can also assist in the process of problem-solving. The leader can use the framework and steps within structured dialogue protocols to assist in conversations revolving around issues and finding solutions. As Aimy noted:

> I think it is essential, especially in a school, when we talk about a given topic, to have someone who is more or less the leader and that person takes opinions from others, does a synthesis of everything, and then tries to find a solution (Aimy).

All participants talked about the positive dynamic of working with the specific protocols to solve problems in more collaborative ways. For example, Aimy mentioned the importance of "being able to find something in common, such as finding a solution that everyone could agree with" in the process of effective problem-solving. Mathilde explained that she found the structure within the *Experience Cube* (Bushe, 2010) protocol helpful when recounting her experience engaging in the collaborative session: "We came up with ideas, gave examples, and we even had some solutions for the problem. Yes, I liked the first session." While each protocol was structured in a different way, the participants noted three prominent characteristics of the three structured dialogue protocols (see table 1). They ensured respectful turn taking, they established clear roles for individuals, and they allowed time for reflection through note taking. These characteristics all correlate to how the structured dialogue protocols fostered the importance of working together to address common problems between participants and to find solutions to them. Éloise explained that "trying to establish a plan, we discuss options to find

concrete solutions, we see what works and we adapt depending on what works". Participants worked together using the structured dialogue protocols, which contributed to creating a successful and effective collaboration.

Figure 1

Perceptions of Participants Regarding Benefits of Structured Dialogue Protocols

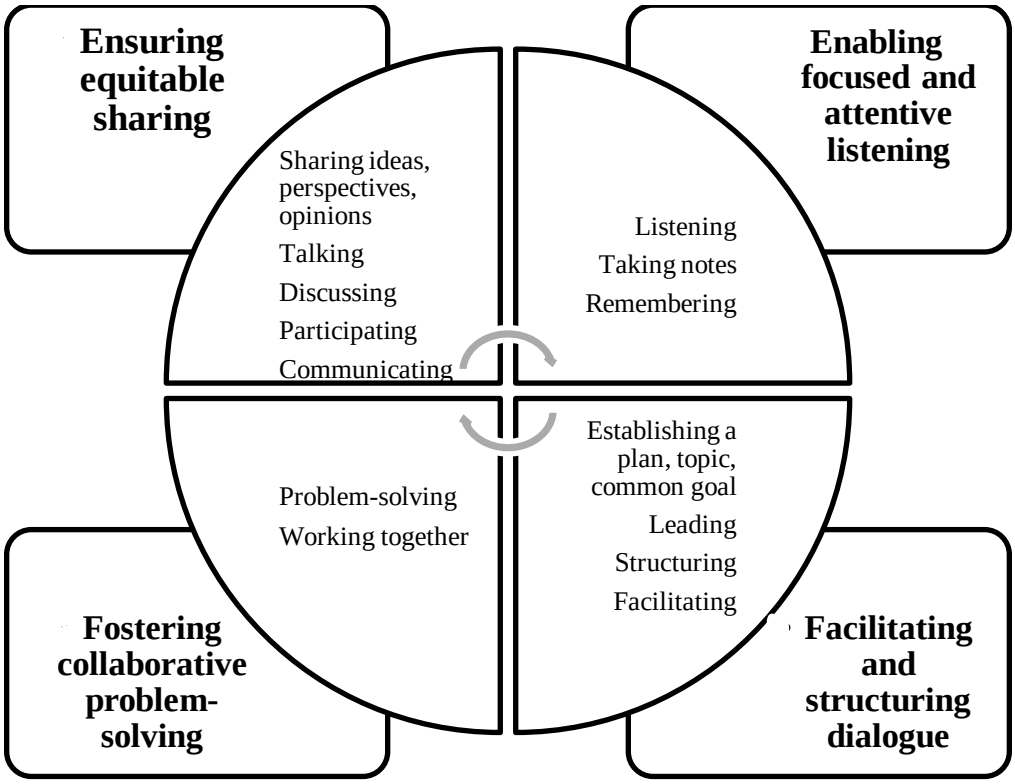

Table 1

Perceptions on the Effectiveness of Structured Dialogue Protocols

Protocol	Protocol characteristics	Participant 1 (Aimy)	Participant 2 (Mathilde)	Participant 3 (Éloise)
Experience Cube	No note taking Reflection time Taking turns for speaking	Least effective	Most effective	Most effective
	Note taking	Most effective	Least effective	

Peeling the Onion	Reflection time Taking turns for speaking	
SWOT	Note taking No taking turns for speaking Reflection time	Least effective

Table 2

Category and Codes Generated during Data Analysis

Category	Codes/subcategories
Ensuring equitable sharing	Sharing ideas Sharing perspectives Sharing opinions Talking Discussing Participating Communicating
Enabling focused and attentive listening	Listening Taking notes Remembering
Facilitating and structuring dialogue	Establishing a plan Establishing a topic Establishing a common goal Leading Structuring Facilitating
Fostering collaborative problem-solving	Problem-solving Working together

Discussion

I began this research curious about whether educators, and more specifically the educators who are my colleagues, saw the potential in structured dialogue protocols for improving collaboration within our context. I wanted to discover what kind of frameworks would be necessary to engender a significant change in the culture of collaboration within my professional context. This research helped to illuminate and confirm some of the insights that I had in my mind prior to undertaking this study. There are four key findings of the present research. The structured dialogue protocols ensured equitable sharing, enabled focused and attentive listening, facilitated and structured the dialogue, and fostered collaborative problem-solving. Participants shared a range of perceptions concerning what they believed to be the most and least effective among the three structured dialogue protocols used in the collaborative sessions (see table 1). The *Experience Cube* protocol was described as the most effective structured dialogue protocol by Mathilde and Éloise, who found that reflection time and taking turns for speaking were helpful. On the other hand, Aimy found this to be the least effective structured dialogue protocol, as there was no note taking. The *Peeling the Onion* protocol was defined as the most effective structured dialogue protocol by Aimy, and as the least effective structured dialogue protocol by Mathilde. This structured dialogue protocol included note taking, reflection time, and taking turns for speaking. Finally, Éloise characterized the *SWOT* protocol as the least effective. While this protocol included reflection time, there was no note taking and no taking turns for speaking. The perceptions of the participants in this study suggest that structured dialogue protocols provide a framework in which collaboration can be effective, and that the interconnected actions that occur because of the protocols themselves play an important role in the strength and success of the conversation.

I used the themes identified in the data to situate the perceptions of the staff members on the effectiveness of the structured dialogue protocols for collaboration. These themes focused on ensuring equitable sharing, enabling focused and attentive listening, facilitating and structuring dialogue, and fostering collaborative problem-solving.

Ensuring Equitable Sharing

This research suggests that the structured dialogue protocols were helpful in ensuring equitable sharing among participants. Participants from this study determined that equitable sharing was achieved with the use of the structured dialogue protocols. Each of the participants was given the opportunity to share their ideas, perspectives and opinions regarding the topic being discussed during the collaborative session. Equitable sharing during collaboration can provide opportunities for individuals to have deeper conversations, as everyone is given the opportunity to reflect and share differing perspectives. These findings reflect the ideas put forth by Kvam (2017) regarding the need for authentic exchanges and sharing differing perspectives for collaboration to be meaningful. Also, a study conducted by Trimble et al. (1998) explains that there should be "equal partners" (p.8) within a collaboration to ensure equitable sharing when working collaboratively in groups. Studies conducted by Borg and Drange (2019) and Acker-Hocevar and Touchton (1999) suggest that equitable sharing within collaboration also means giving all educators a chance to contribute to discussions and decisions within a school, whether they are teachers or in formal leadership positions. Participants mentioned that they do not always feel heard by individuals in higher positions, and that structured dialogue protocols may encourage more voices to be heard. In an educational setting, structured dialogue protocols can be useful for individuals as they navigate the difficult task of engaging in effective conversations. For example, teachers could be struggling with an issue in their classroom, but

without being given the opportunity to share with others, their perspective cannot be heard. Structured dialogue protocols are an approach to collaboration that puts in place the steps to be followed to ensure all voices are heard. The structured dialogue protocols can reassure individuals that there will be a designated time for each person in the group to share their experiences. By using structured dialogue protocols in meetings and other professional conversations, individuals are provided with the space to be heard and to share their ideas.

Enabling Focused and Attentive Listening

This study revealed that the structured dialogue protocols helped participants to listen more attentively to others during their conversations. Focused and attentive listening enhanced the conversations and may have led to developing greater trust among participants. Participants found that the structured dialogue protocols were organized in such a way that listening was prioritized, which gave them the opportunity to focus on what was being said by others. Participants recognized that the structured dialogue protocols were effective in improving the collaborative dynamic within the group. They found that they could listen effectively, as the structured dialogue protocols required them to take notes. This provided a helpful tool to retain what others had said during the conversation.

The work of Bergman et al. (2012) suggests that attentive listening occurs through repeated interaction. As the participants in this study engaged with structured dialogue protocols, they became familiar with their use. The structured dialogue protocols used in this study included a large component of listening. While this may have been unfamiliar to some participants, the structured dialogue protocols provided a framework in which individuals were given the time to understand the importance of focused and attentive listening, a crucial component for effective collaboration. The findings from a study by Kuh (2016) suggested that

the use of tangible tools to structure conversations enabled mutual engagement and offered a way to sustain collaboration. Kuh (2016) also mentions that structured dialogue protocols steer conversations in a specific direction, promoting each speaker's voice. This is echoed in the perceptions of the participants from this study, who explained that they found the use of a structured dialogue protocol allowed them to feel prepared to listen attentively, share their perspective, and to feel secure in their role during the collaborative sessions. Furthermore, participants demonstrated an inclination towards implementing the structured dialogue protocols into their future practice. This may be an outcome of the structured dialogue protocols being organized in a way that promoted the use of focused and attentive listening during collaboration. For example, the structured dialogue protocols could be used in the future to facilitate staff meetings and to develop listening skills in the classroom.

Facilitating and Structuring Dialogue

This study demonstrates the importance of facilitating and structuring dialogue during the collaborative conversations. Participants showed an appreciation for the structured dialogue protocols by explaining that they were organized and specific, which allowed crucial discussions to occur effectively. Participants identified the positive impact of the roles taken on by the facilitator in helping to guide conversations during collaboration and ensuring equitable sharing within a group. This finding reflects research by Nelson et al. (2010), who suggest that those leading a discussion have an important role in guiding effective conversations between educators. Many participants noted the significance of the different roles to be taken on by the facilitator that led to a more effective and collaborative environment. Gerpott (2019) suggested that behaviours demonstrated by the leader of collaborative conversations are important in facilitating effective collaboration. It was noted by Gerpott (2019) that the roles taken on by the

leader evolve during a team's work together. In the case of the individuals engaging with the structured dialogue protocols in this study, there was a designated person to facilitate each session, and participants explained how the task of the facilitator was crucial in having an effective conversation. Gerpott (2019) explained that emergent leadership roles and behaviours can also result from the varying dynamic of communication and interactions between participants within collaboration. This idea is supported by Éloise, who explained that their role as a leader emerged, despite not being drawn to the task, but because the dynamic and interactions within the group pushed them to do so to achieve the group's desired outcome. In various collaborative contexts, individuals want to feel that the time being put into is being used effectively. A facilitator – whether designated or emergent – plays an important role in ensuring that a conversation is productive. In the case of this study, the structured dialogue protocols provided the facilitator with the means to make sure the conversation allowed participants to establish a clear plan, topic, and goal for their discussion. Structure within conversations can be ensured with the help of an individual to facilitate a conversation between educators. Structured dialogue protocols may also provide an opportunity for educators, who demonstrate capacities as potential leaders, to develop skills in facilitating and structuring dialogue between their colleagues.

Fostering Collaborative Problem-Solving

This study suggests that structured dialogue protocols are beneficial in collaboration because they serve the purpose of fostering collaborative problem-solving. The structured dialogue protocols in this study were organized in such a way that participants were able to engage in conversations that emphasized talking through problems. The participants reacted well to the fact that most of the structured dialogue protocols used in this study had a specific step that

set aside time to discuss possible solutions to specific issues. This meant that participants all shared their point of view on a problem, responded to others' perspectives, and had time to reflect on that part of the conversation before discussing solutions. Participants expressed their appreciation for the time provided within the structured dialogue protocols to discuss problem-solving. This echoes the work of Nelson et al (2010), who explain that intentional and transparent steps are necessary in moving towards more effective conversations while collaborating. Additionally, a study by Kvam (2017) demonstrated that identifying problems and their solutions must be included in effective collaboration. The structured dialogue protocols used in the collaborative sessions provided specific steps to give participants time to fully understand the issues presented in the conversation, respond thoughtfully, and then to discuss solutions together. Structured dialogue protocols present an approach to problem-solving educators can use to discuss difficult issues. Structured dialogue protocols offer specific steps to be followed when discussing a problem, which could alleviate any conflict that may occur during these conversations when they are not structured.

Limitations

There were inevitably limitations due to the sample size of this study. As there was a small number of participants in this study, their experiences do not reflect those of all elementary school staff members. Also, within the sample size, there were two education assistants and one teacher, which limited the generalizability of this study to classroom teachers. Future studies could consider larger sample sizes or focus solely on classroom teachers to accomplish an improved exploration of their perceptions.

A second limitation was the context of the COVID-19 pandemic during which this study was conducted. The pandemic has created significant shifts in the context of education and

collaboration and influenced how participant responses were gathered. As previously mentioned, interviews were completed using an online platform rather than being done in person. In addition, the stress and modified working conditions within the context of the pandemic could have had an impact on how participants responded during interviews. Future research is recommended in this area when normal operations in schools resume.

Implications and Recommendations

One interesting observation I noted during my data analysis was participants' inclination towards using structured dialogue protocols for future collaboration, which reflects Bushe's (2010) belief that there is a shift from "command and control to collaboration" (p.1); the concept of organization within a group of colleagues is moving from a few individuals in leadership positions being in charge to a shared leadership approach, which gives teams the ability to make their own decisions. Research suggests the need for more purposeful attention to embedding structured dialogue protocols into collaboration between teachers and their colleagues. It is evident in the scholarship that schools are making the effort to promote deep conversation, trust, decision-making, and collaboration within teacher conversations. An examination of the literature and its connection to the findings leads to several important questions: What do educators need in order to dig deep into the many facets of teaching and learning? What does it take to engage in a meaningful conversation? How can a culture of collaboration in which meaningful dialogue and collaboration can occur, be facilitated? How can structured dialogue protocols enhance shared leadership and decision-making in schools?

I am left thinking about what has not been considered in the scholarship. Elementary teachers' and other staff members' conversations remain an under researched area. Promoting trust between individuals within collaborative contexts may not be a priority in educational

settings, as many other dynamics of collaboration can take precedence. Also, in the scholarship reviewed, the link between conversation content and teaching practice has not been made clear. There is an interest among the elementary school staff members in implementing structured dialogue protocols into their practice within the context of this study. Because the structured dialogue protocols facilitated the conversations that took place during the collaborative sessions, participants have seen the benefits and the potential of applying them to future collaboration within the building. This suggests the need to explore structured dialogue protocols that can be used in different educational contexts and modified if necessary. There is a need for individuals to become familiar and comfortable with the use of structured dialogue protocols so they can be embedded into the culture of collaboration in schools. The structured dialogue protocols used in this study could be a means of making collaboration more inviting for educators in their work together.

At a broader level, this study has implications for all schools. If the benefits of structured dialogue protocols are of enough value within the study site for this research, they may also be advantageous for collaboration in other schools. As a result of this study, I will be looking at collaboration through the lens of structure, equity, and facilitation in hopes of providing opportunities to other educators to engage in more effective collaborative contexts. Structured dialogue protocols can be used to conduct meetings and difficult conversations, and to engage in learning conversations between educators during professional development. Mentorship programs may also recognize the importance of structured dialogue protocols in building trust, authentic connections and effectual relationships between mentors and mentees. Structured dialogue protocols could be embedded into teacher education to enhance the conversations between early career teachers and the educators mentoring them.

In terms of future research, there is more exploration to be done with the findings of this study in relation to how perceptions of structured dialogue protocols can influence the way in which frameworks for collaboration are carried out and facilitated. Future research with larger sample sizes could consider structured dialogue protocols not only from this study, but additional protocols designed by Easton (2009), Bushe (2010), and others. Additionally, it would be important to consider the use of structured dialogue protocols by individuals in positions of leadership as a tool to engage with their staff in more effective, transparent, and meaningful ways.

Conclusion

The structured dialogue protocols created an environment in which participants were willing to listen, share, lead, and tackle problem-solving using a team approach. The benefits that have been brought forward through the experience of engaging with the structured dialogue protocols to collaborate could serve a more significant purpose in terms of facilitating collaboration for those taking on leadership roles in education. The structured dialogue protocols have revealed the elaborate but purposeful art of engaging in facilitated conversations and have provided a clear starting point for future collaborative experiences. I am looking forward to sharing the structured dialogue protocols this study has introduced me to with other educators. Also, it will be beneficial to explore additional structured dialogue protocols to engage in future collaboration in various contexts. This process could consist of joining other educators in exploring protocols for collaboration, working within their frameworks to accomplish meaningful conversations, and remain open-minded to the steep learning curve that may accompany a new approach to working collaboratively as a leader in the education system. As Isaacs (1999) reminds us, “dialogue is a process that can allow us to become aware of our

participation in a much wider whole. Like the telescope, it focuses the available light more completely so that we can see more" (p. 90). As educators, we value our professional time. However, within a school day, our collegial time is limited. To ensure our time together as professionals counts, we must ask the following questions. Could structured dialogue protocols help make collaboration move towards more reciprocal, meaningful and dialogic conversations? Can they foster more meaningful and collaborative conversations? Can they ensure that all voices are heard? If so, which structured dialogue protocols are the most effective for an educational setting? Structured dialogue protocols have allowed me to discover an approach to collaboration that creates time and space for every voice to be heard. This unique experience has opened up the possibilities of implementing structured dialogue protocols with students and with colleagues as a way to encourage collaborative dialogue.

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Appendix A

Research Ethics Board - Certificate of Ethical Approval

HREB Protocol No: 100572

Principal Investigator: Ms. Diane Foire
Team Members: Ms. Diane Foire (Principal Investigator)
Dr. Joanne Robertson (Supervisor)
Dr. Sheryl MacMath (Course Instructor)
Title: Perceptions of Elementary School Staff Members on the Effectiveness of Structured Dialogue for Collaboration
Department: Faculty of Professional Studies\Teacher Education
Effective: December 16, 2020
Expiry: December 15, 2021

The Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) has reviewed and approved the ethics of the above research. The HREB is constituted and operated in accordance with the requirements of the UFV Policy on Human Research Ethics and the current Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2).

The approval is subject to the following conditions:
1. Approval is granted only for the research and purposes described in the application.
2. Approval is for one year. A Request for Renewal must be submitted 2-3 weeks before the above expiry date.
3. Modifications to the approved research must be submitted as an Amendment to be reviewed and approved by the HREB before the changes can be implemented. If the changes are substantial, a new request for approval must be sought. *****An exception can be made where the change is necessary to eliminate an immediate risk to participant(s) (TPCS2 Article 6.15). Such changes may be implemented but must be reported to the HREB within 5 business days.
4. If an adverse incident occurs, an Adverse Incident Event form must be completed and submitted.
5. During the project period, the HREB must be notified of any issues that may have ethical implications.
*NEW 6. A Final Report Event Form must be submitted to the HREB when the research is complete or terminated.
**Please submit your Research Continuity Plan to REGS@ufv.ca before beginning your research. The plan can be found here: https://www.ufv.ca/research/

Thank you, and all the best with your research.
UFV Human Research Ethics Board
Do not reply to this email

Appendix B

The Peeling the Onion Protocol

Adapted from "Protocols from Professional Learning" (Easton,2009)

Step 1 Introductions	Everyone states their name and role
Step 2 Describing the Issue	One 'issue' is brought forward to the group by an individual – as the individual describes in detail the issue, others take notes and observe/listen.
Step 3 Free Writing	Each individual free writes after the issue is presented.
Step 4 Discussion	Each individual presents comments, questions, examples, or insights about the issue using particular prompts to facilitate discussion (see Easton, 2009, p. 72). As each individual speaks, the person who brought forward the issue takes notes.
Step 5 Reflection	The individual who brought forward the issue presents their reflections on the issue based on what notes were taken and what was heard during Step 4. The facilitator asks the following questions: How did this protocol help you with the issue? What worked well? What would you do differently?

Appendix C

The Experience Cube Protocol

Adapted from "Clear Leadership: Sustaining real collaboration and partnership at work" (Bushe, 2009)

Observations: Sensory data (information you take in through your senses), primarily what you see and hear. What a video camera would record. I observe: "I've noticed…", "I saw that…", "I heard you say…"
Thoughts: The meaning you add to your observations (i.e., the way you make sense of them, including your beliefs, expectations, assumptions, judgments, values and principles). We call this the "story you make up". I think: "I believe that was…", "I think it is…", "My story is…"
Feelings: Your emotional or physiological response to the thoughts and observations. Feelings words such as sad, mad, glad, scared, or a description of what is happening in your body. I feel: "I'm really pleased….", "It concerned me when….", "I appreciate your commitment to….", "It troubled me …."
Wants: Clear description of the outcome you seek. Wants go deeper than a simple request for action. Once you clearly state what you want, there may be different ways to achieve it. I want: "I want to…"; "I need…"; "I wish…", "I hope…"
So What/Now What: How has this helped us build relationship and reach understanding?

Appendix D

The SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) Protocol

Adapted from "Protocols from Professional Learning" (Easton,2009)

1. Question(s):
2. Clarify the issue by asking more (non-judgemental) questions:
3. Writing about the issue related to the key question:
4. Discussion:

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

5. Reflection and Debriefing:

Appendix E

Original and translated interview questions

1. How would you define collaboration?
   Comment définiriez-vous le terme « collaboration »?

2. Please share and describe a previous experience you have had with professional collaboration. Was the collaboration structured? Was the collaboration open and unstructured? What stood out for you?
   Partagez et décrivez une expérience précédente de collaboration professionnelle. La collaboration était-elle structurée? La collaboration était-elle ouverte et sans structure? Qu'est-ce qui vous a marqué?

3. Have you ever participated in professional collaboration that used protocols or structured dialogue techniques? If so, please provide an example.
   Avez-vous déjà participé à une collaboration professionnelle utilisant des protocoles ou des techniques de dialogue structuré?

4. What works best for you when collaborating with colleagues? Please provide an example if possible.
   Expliquez ce qui fonctionne le mieux pour vous lorsque vous collaborez avec des collègues. Veuillez donner un exemple si possible.

5. Explain your general perception of how the protocols went for you during the collaboration sessions.
   Expliquez votre perception générale du fonctionnement des protocoles pendant les sessions de collaboration.

6. Which of the protocols were most effective in your opinion? Which of the protocols were least effective in your opinion? Please explain why.
   Quel(s) protocole(s) ont été les plus efficaces à votre avis? Quel(s) protocole(s) ont été les moins efficaces selon vous?Pourquoi?

7. Is there anything else you would like to add?
   Y a-t-il autre chose que vous aimeriez ajouter?

Appendix F

Code Frequency from Translated Data

Code	Transcript	Frequency of code in transcript	Total frequency of code
Sharing/Communicating	1 2 3	5 4 2	11
Listening	1 2 3	5 4 1	10
Leading	1 2 3	3 3 3	9
Problem-solving	1 2 3	3 3 2	8
Talking/Discussing	1 2 3	1 3 2	6
Working together	1 2 3	1 3 1	5
Centering around topic	1 2 3	1 2 2	5
Participating	1 2 3	2 2 1	5
Establishing (plan, topic, common goal)	1 2 3	1 1 3	4
Taking notes	1 2 3	1 2 1	4

Appendix G

Code Frequency from Original Data

Code	Transcription	Fréquence du code dans la transcription	Fréquence total du code
Écouter	1 2 3	5 6 1	12
Être un leader	1 2 3	6 1 4	11
Partager	1 2 3	3 5 1	9
Discuter	1 2 3	5 3 0	8
Trouver des solutions	1 2 3	1 3 2	6
Participer	1 2 3	1 3 0	4
Communiquer	1 2 3	2 2 0	4
Structurer	1 2 3	1 3 0	4
Diriger	1 2 3	0 3 1	4
Établir	1 2 3	0 0 4	4