

**TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF COLLABORATION IN ALTERNATE
EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY**

by

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MAJOR PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF EDUCATION
(EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND MENTORSHIP)

In the
Teacher Education Department

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UNIVERSITY OF THE FRASER VALLEY

2023

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Abstract

This research aimed to capture teachers' perceptions of collaboration in alternate education with the goal of making recommendations for the future. Many studies have varying definitions and structures for collaboration, revealing the importance of context. This study used phenomenology to conduct interviews with four participants at an alternate education school that has a weekly collaboration structure within the timetable. These interviews gathered rich data of teachers' experiences of collaboration using in vivo coding for data analyses. The findings resulted in a conceptualization of collaboration through togetherness, relevance to context, professional learning, and collaborative communities. Additionally, participants' experiences of collaboration were influenced by planning for collaboration, attitudes towards collaboration, and engaging in collaboration. Finally, participants made suggestions to increase the effectiveness of collaboration, including restructuring collaboration, increasing teachers' voice and choice, as well as enhancing accountability among teachers and administrators. This research suggests a need for more research on collaboration to be conducted in alternate education settings.

Keywords: teacher collaboration, alternate education, professional learning, phenomenology, collaboration

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the network of supportive people I had during this research. My peers, the MEd faculty, my family and friends showed care and the necessary amount of ‘push’ to help me grow throughout this process. I am grateful for the participants who made this study possible. Your voices and engagement provided me with a learning opportunity and a new perspective in my practice.

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Acronyms

- i. *IEP*: Individual Education Plan
- ii. *ITT*: Interdisciplinary Teacher Teams
- iii. *PLC*: Professional Learning Community

Introduction

I am a fifth-year secondary school teacher who has only worked in alternate education. Before entering the teaching profession, I always found myself in sports and other job settings that required teamwork to be successful. Working with others and finding ways to collaborate has always been an area of interest for me. I am fascinated by hearing others' stories as a form of connecting and learning. Alternate education was not a place I thought I would be this early in my career. I saw alternate education as a 'down the road' home for me, once I had developed more skills and confidence in my practice. However, prior to teaching I developed and ran an afterschool program on a local First Nation reserve working with youth to develop their social, academic, and general life skills. Some of these youth were already attending an alternate school, and I knew those were the youth that I wanted to work with in the future. I place a high value on building relationships with both colleagues and students. I also strive to continually push my own learning to grow not only as a professional but as an individual as well.

During my first year in an alternate education school, I was nudged into my first leadership role. I never identified myself as a 'leader;' however, a few of my colleagues convinced me to put my name forward for the English and Social Studies department head position. This role challenged me to find my voice as an early career teacher within my building and with other district staff. In the following years, I found myself on more committees and attending more meetings to advocate for students such as school-based team meetings, graduation planning committees, and a collaboration/professional development committee.

Although I never envisioned myself as a leader, I wanted to further my own learning and education to grow in my profession. Being a person who enjoys building relationships, I applied

for a Masters program with a cohort model in Educational Leadership and Mentorship. I hoped that my graduate studies would help me develop my leadership skills to combat the imposter syndrome I was struggling with. I also hoped that the skills I was learning could directly impact the work that I engage in as a department head and teacher sitting on various committees. The focus of this study developed through my interest in teamwork, collaboration, and commitment to alternate education.

Context

This research was conducted at an alternate education secondary school (grades 9-12). The British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care (2022) defines this context by stating:

Alternate education programs focus on educational, social and emotional issues for students whose needs are not being met in a traditional school program. An alternate education program provides its support through differentiated instruction, specialized program delivery and enhanced counselling services based on students' needs. (para. 1)

This broad definition offers room for interpretation as to what programs may look like across school settings. Each alternate education site can be run differently than its neighboring school district. Every school will have varying student needs; the student needs are what drive the structure and resources available at that school. Understanding the structure and composition of Briteside Learning Centre¹ provides context for this research.

¹ Briteside Learning Centre is a pseudonym

Briteside Learning Centre offers various differentiated learning opportunities for students. Students are placed in different programs based on their learning and behavioral needs. Some programs are full-day and teacher-led while others offer part-time self-paced work, off-site programming, or flexible scheduling to meet one-on-one for additional support. In addition to school counselling services, many community agencies meet with students at the school. These community agencies support areas such as mental health, substance use counselling, anger management, status card renewal/application for Indigenous youth, and employment programs. To further support success, all Briteside students have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) with individualized learning objectives tailored to their personal needs. The student population in alternate education is often described as ‘at-risk’ or ‘vulnerable’ with higher numbers of Indigenous youth and children in care (Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2022). The implementation of collaboration time within this school setting allows for school staff and outside agencies to work together to support the complex needs of these particular alternate education students.

Creating a learning environment to support these students requires various forms of collaboration. At the time of this study, teaching staff at Briteside Learning Centre were given dedicated time to collaborate weekly within their teaching hours. On the same day each week, two consecutive hours were scheduled within the timetable for teachers to meet together to collaborate on a specific topic. Many teachers were teaching multiple courses at varying grade levels and delivering the curriculum asynchronously, which is daunting to accomplish in isolation. In addition, teachers are also case managers, adding the planning of individualized behavior supports for each student to their responsibilities. Collaboration time was used for various activities and topics such as curriculum building, outside agency presentations,

professional learning, updated district policies review, and support for online learning tools. The Vice Principal of the school was responsible for booking collaboration presentations with district or community resources and co-creating a collaboration schedule with a small committee of teachers who volunteered to be part of the planning process. Given this unique opportunity for collaboration, I was interested to hear what teachers had to say about their experiences.

Research Question

For Briteside teachers to be able to collaborate weekly within their teaching hours is a rare and valuable opportunity, compared to other schools within the district. One of the reasons that I find value in collaboration is how it allows time to hear others' voices. Over the years, however, I have heard colleagues share that collaboration can be a waste of time and, in some instances, I may have agreed. Simultaneously, there have been many instances of collaboration being valuable. I have always wondered what factors shape how collaboration is experienced. Being curious about when colleagues find collaboration more or less useful led to my research question: What are teachers' perceptions of collaboration in an alternate education setting?

Scholarly Significance

Collaboration is a vague term that can be brought to life in many different ways. Collaboration is rooted in its context; what may work in one context may not work in another. Collaboration also requires a purpose, planning, sharing, creating, and a level of trust between the individuals engaging in it. Collaboration involves finding a way for multiple individuals to come together to engage in opportunities for growth. Hearing the stories of teachers who regularly engage in collaboration design, planning, and work provided valuable insight into experiences of collaboration in an alternate education setting.

Briteside values teacher collaboration time, as reflected in structuring weekly, uninterrupted collaboration time within the timetable. This inquiry encapsulated both positive and negative experiences of collaboration, as well as potential improvements for consideration specifically in alternate education. Findings from this research were used to inform my own practice as an alternate education teacher who sits on a collaboration planning committee. The study's findings will be shared with Briteside Learning Centre to further support teachers' learning experiences during weekly collaboration time. To better understand the perceptions of teachers' experiences with collaboration, relevant literature is explored next to provide an overview of what collaboration is, unique styles of collaboration, and tensions within the literature.

Literature Review

Collaboration time for teachers is a valuable opportunity that not many engage in within their school's timetable. Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) state that "professional collaboration boosts student achievement, increases teacher retention, and enhances the implementation of innovation and change" (p. 3) emphasizing the benefits collaboration can yield. If collaboration yields positive results, why is collaboration not a priority in all schools or across public education systems? Another important question is, how is effective teacher collaboration structured? The literature reviewed suggests that collaboration can be presented in a variety of forms requiring specific characteristics and, if done incorrectly, collaboration can create a hostile environment. The research indicates that learning about collaboration can be done through what teachers say about collaboration, how teachers learn during collaboration, identifying forms of collaboration, and looking at individuals' motivations during collaborative experiences.

What is Teacher Collaboration?

‘Collaboration’ in education is an umbrella term for many forms of teachers working together. There is no single definition that the literature agrees to work from. In some instances, there is a distinction between what it means for a teacher to be collaborating and for a teacher to be a collaborator. Howard (2019) identifies three levels of collaboration: co-ordination, co-operation/partnership, and integration. The first level is merely exchanging information, which then progresses to an intensive style of shared thinking and conceptualization, finally moving to a level of integration (Howard, 2019). Meirink et al. (2007) describe collaboration as activities that fall into the following categories: experimenting, reflecting, learning from others without interaction and learning from others with interaction. Collaboration operates on a continuum and can be teacher-directed or administrator-directed (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018), and participants' motivation during collaboration can influence the level of engagement (Bakhtiar & Hadwin, 2020). While working within the realm of collaboration, it is important to distinguish between a few types of collaboration commonly seen in education settings.

Types of Collaboration

Collaboration in schools can take many forms depending on the context, specifically the needs or goals of the staff. While reviewing existing academic literature, a few forms of collaboration were repeatedly referenced. In addition, specific types of collaboration that seemed to align with Briteside’s current model of collaboration were noted. The four styles of collaboration selected for further review were interdisciplinary teacher teams (ITT), collaborative professionalism, professional learning communities (PLC), and contrived collegiality.

Interdisciplinary Teacher Teams

Havnes (2009) describes an ITT as a type of collaboration where “teachers responsible for teaching different school subjects regularly come together not only to plan interdisciplinary teaching and coordinate their individual subject-specific teaching, but also to discuss their teaching practice, the challenges they experience as teachers and pedagogy” (p. 156). ITTs create a beautiful opportunity, if done well, for teachers to collaborate and create engaging cross-curricular learning opportunities for students. While analyzing ITTs based on their interactions rather than what was said about the experience of ITTs, one study found four patterns of interaction: preserving individualism, coordination, cooperation and sharing (Havnes, 2009). Establishing a collaborative environment with teachers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds can be difficult and can lead to more of a ‘preserving individualism’ pattern than the others. However, cooperation and sharing are deemed indicators of a strong learning community (Havnes, 2009).

Collaborative Professionalism

Hargreaves and O’Connor (2018) encourage educators to understand the difference between *professional collaboration* and *collaborative professionalism*. The authors create a clear distinction between the concepts by stating that “*professional collaboration* is descriptive—it delineates how people work together in a profession. *Collaborative professionalism* is normative—it is about creating stronger and better professional practice together” (p. 4). This definition creates intentional language to distinguish when teachers are simply working together and when they are creating a strong collaborative environment. Although Campbell (2017) does not directly use the term collaborative professionalism, they identify key components of effective learning environments around learning design, support, and sustainability. Collaborative

professionalism is not limited to a single site of teachers and could be extended beyond their walls. There is an opportunity for schools to be linked together through collaboration based on similar themes or issues they may face in their school community (Campbell, 2007).

Professional Learning Communities

PLCs have gone through three generations of development since their origin in 1997, with the third generation closely resembling the concept of collaborative professionalism defined by Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018). In the early stages, PLCs were focused on a common goal using dialogue and evidence to increase students' achievement. The next iteration of PLCs included more of an administrator-driven goal focusing on short-term student achievement. Lastly, the third generation of PLCs shifted to a sustainable culture of collaborative inquiry focusing on the whole development of the student (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). For PLCs to be most successful they must be led by teachers, concentrate on the whole student, and establish norms for professional dialogue allowing for difficult conversations to take place (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Meirink et al. (2007) propose seven configurations of learning activities relating to changes in thinking or behaviour in collaborative settings: "experimenting with other teaching methods, becoming aware of forgotten own plans, becoming aware of own shortcomings in teaching methods, valuing colleagues' teaching methods, confirmation of own teaching method, getting/obtaining new insights, and reflecting on and valuing collaboration" (p.156). The configuration that occurred for all participants was valuing colleagues' teaching methods, supporting the notion of a professional dialogue around teaching practices (Meirink et al., 2007).

Contrived Collegiality

According to Datnow (2011), collaboration has an “ugly twin” (p. 148) that takes the form of contrived collegiality. Contrived collegiality is described as “administratively regulated, compulsory, implementation-oriented, fixed in time and space, and predictable” (Datnow, 2011, p. 148), establishing very limiting parameters on what could be considered collaboration. This style of collaboration does not lead to meaningful nor sustainable change; however, in some areas of education, this style of collaboration still exists (Hargreaves, 2019). This concept is similarly reflected in the second generation of PLCs, which triggered a shift to a more sustainable and authentic practice of collaboration. There is no ‘one size fits all’ for authentic and meaningful collaboration; it is crucial to be responsive to a community’s needs and provide appropriate support in order to move away from contrived collegiality.

Culture of Collaboration

Merely creating time and space for teachers to collaborate is not nearly enough to support the work of collaboration. Hargreaves (2019) states “collaboration is not always beneficial, even if its effects are generally positive” (p. 608), expressing the importance of creating a culture of collaboration to establish a positive environment for the work to take place. Similarly, Campbell (2017) acknowledges that professional learning needs are diverse, and an important aspect of continuing the learning comes from support and sustainability. To create a culture of collaboration, Datnow (2011) suggests creating norms for collaboration and to start by providing time for feedback rather than requiring teachers to implement action. A culture of collaboration can spark creativity and build trust through connections with colleagues (Howard, 2019). However, creating this culture can be challenging when working with teachers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, in addition to requiring time to nurture the development of a culture

(Havnes, 2009; Schoenfeld, 2004). Thus, importance should be placed on creating this culture through preconditions such as creating time for collaboration, flexibility, and encouraging feedback, as well as monitoring collaborative environments once they are established (Datnow, 2011; Vangrieken et al., 2015).

Tensions and Gaps in the Literature

Current research and professional literature suggest that education is a complex environment for establishing collaborative opportunities. Themes in the literature indicate that successful collaboration leads to better collegial relationships, personal growth, and aspects of school improvement (Datnow, 2011; Howard 2019; Tallman, 2021). The factors for successful collaboration include creating norms for collaboration, allowing collaboration to be teacher-directed, and establishing a collaborative culture (Datnow, 2011; Hargreaves, 2019; Tallman, 2021). However, ‘success’ in this context was generally linked to student achievement rather than teacher learning. Although, successful collaboration can increase the likelihood of teachers staying in high-needs schools by linking collaboration to teacher needs rather than student needs (Vangrieken et al., 2015). Additionally, the literature uses collaboration as an overarching term to describe various structures of professional learning. Unfortunately, by using a general term there is little consistency for what is described as collaboration in different contexts.

The research investigated for this literature review lacked empirical evidence. However, there is an abundance of literature focusing on what teachers say about their experiences of collaboration through phenomenological analysis (Datnow, 2011; Howard, 2019; Meirink et al., 2007; Tallman, 2021). In addition, the literature is supported through many systematic reviews using narrative synthesis to create an overview of previous research (Hargreaves, 2019; Schoenfeld, 2004; Vangrieken et al., 2015). In one instance, researchers used video recordings to

focus on what teachers do in collaboration rather than what they say about collaboration (Havnes, 2009). Few researchers commented on the importance of context. Tallman's (2021) five participants had been teaching for at least 10 years and all but one had been at that school site for at least five years. This suggests that the participants were aware of the school culture, which raises questions about whether the same results would be demonstrated with participants who were new to the school or early in their teaching careers. Context is crucial for understanding the development of a collaborative culture.

While the literature focuses on collaboration at various levels throughout the K-12 education system, there was a lack of representation for alternate education. Thus, the conceptualization of effective collaboration would be enriched by exploring the experiences of teachers in alternate education. This research study examines alternate education teachers' perceptions of collaboration time at a school with a pre-existing structure of weekly collaboration time, with the intention of addressing gaps in the literature related to providing context and exploring the concept of collaboration beyond 'traditional' school settings.

Methodology

The methodological approach that best suited my inquiry was qualitative research. Yilmaz (2013) describes qualitative research as exploring "what it assumes to be a socially constructed dynamic reality through a framework" and "an in-depth description of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the people involved" (p. 312). This aligned seamlessly with my research question: What are teachers' perceptions of collaboration in an alternate education setting? This research methodology enabled me to authentically gather data around the experiences teachers have had with collaboration time. As qualitative research is inherently

subjective, I accounted for my own biases and assumptions according to my paradigmatic position.

I approached my inquiry within a constructivist paradigm to further understand the phenomenon of collaboration through ‘bottom-up’ research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). A constructivist worldview seeks understanding, accepts multiple realities, and is socially constructed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). A constructivist paradigm can be further described by referencing one’s ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Ontology is the understanding of the nature of reality (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). I have an ontological belief that our experiences are relative to our context allowing for multiple constructed realities to exist simultaneously. This research study aimed to describe the different realities and experiences of the participants. Epistemology describes the relationship between knowledge and the researcher (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). As a constructivist, I was asking participants to share their lived experiences with me in order to co-construct understandings of collaboration. Trust is crucial in the relationship between participant and researcher to ensure that participants are willing to be open and vulnerable in sharing their experiences. Axiology is concerned with the values of research which can also be understood through bias or measures to reduce the impact of bias (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The axiology of a constructivist researcher recognizes that bias is always present. As the researcher, I described my biases and aimed to suspend them while working with participants to ensure their voices were accurately represented. Acknowledging my bias helped me to accept my subjective experiences and learn more about others’ experiences. An important aim of this research was the accurate and trustworthy description of each participant’s unique, lived experiences of collaboration.

Method

Within the realm of qualitative research, I used phenomenology as my methodological strategy. A phenomenological study describes the perceptions of those individuals whose lived experiences include a particular concept or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, the phenomenon being studied was teacher collaboration in an alternate school setting. A phenomenological study is executed through a set of procedures. Due to the subjective nature of phenomenology, researchers must bracket themselves by acknowledging and addressing their biases and assumptions from their own experiences of the phenomenon being investigated. After collecting data through interviews, I created transcripts to pull out significant ideas through selecting quotes and attaching an in vivo code (Saldana, 2011) to each selected phrase. Next, I organized codes and grouped them together based on commonalities, organizing ideas into themes. Following the development of themes, findings are reported to describe the general experiences of the participants in relation to the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The process of phenomenological interviewing enabled me to listen to participants, further develop my understanding, and summarize four participants' experiences of collaboration in an alternate education setting. Reporting the essence of participants' experiences was crucial, recognizing it is impossible for researchers to eliminate their bias entirely (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Bracketing

As an individual who works in education, I have assumptions about collaboration that sparked my interest in this phenomenon. I believed collaboration could make a valuable contribution to a successful team. Especially in education settings, collaboration enables teachers to work in cross-curricular groups, share resources, and develop a culture of teamwork. In my experience, 'top-down' structures of collaboration in schools have not been as effective or

valuable as those experiences created from the ‘bottom-up’. Working with a school that has weekly collaboration time for teachers, I constantly asked myself: How can collaboration time be more effective? Bracketing my assumptions and biases related to these types of questions during the research process was crucial.

Various measures were taken to ensure my assumptions and biases did not influence the data. During the research process I kept a journal, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018), to reflect on my experiences and note any questions or connections that surfaced while interviewing participants. While reading through the transcripts, I made comments and notes in the margins to keep my ideas separate from participants’ voices. I sent the transcripts to the corresponding participants for member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to ensure their ideas were accurately recorded. My supervisor also served as a second eye to ensure my biases and assumptions were not making their way into the data. During the coding process, my supervisor was able to check my codes to ensure that I was accurately describing the participants’ ideas. The focus of my research was to have participant voices as a priority.

Data Sources

This research was conducted at an alternate education site composed of approximately 250 students at the secondary school level. Brideside Learning Centre is located in British Columbia, Canada; a more definitive geographic area is not disclosed to protect the confidentiality of participants. The participants were purposefully sampled from a group of teachers working at a single alternate education site. Four participants were selected with the criteria of having worked at the school for a minimum of one year to ensure they were familiar with the weekly collaboration structure.

After receiving ethics approval (see Appendix A) from the school district and the university, potential participants received an email invitation through their school district email obtained from the public school's website. Initially, nine teachers replied with interest in participating. To narrow the potential participant pool, I requested they send an additional email containing information regarding their gender, years of teaching at their school, and program areas they had taught. Factors such as gender, teaching experiences, and areas of experience were used to create a diverse group of participants. A consent form followed for signature to confirm participants' consent to participating in the study. Participants completed a one-on-one interview that was audio recorded and later transcribed. After transcription, participants were asked to check and approve their transcripts to ensure their voices were fully and accurately encapsulated. To further support representing their voice, if any quotes were chosen to be used in the final report, their approval was requested.

Participants. Four teachers were selected as participants for this research. All participants provided written consent, were interviewed in person, and member checked their own transcript to ensure their voices were accurately captured. All the participants approved their transcripts without changes.

The participants chose the pseudonyms Rhys, Sally, Kacy, and Hailey. The group consisted of three female teachers and one male teacher. One of the participants was a non-enrolling teacher, while the other three were classroom teachers who taught various subjects and grade levels. Participants held a variety of teaching experiences. One member was in their fourth year of teaching with all of those years being in alternate education. Another participant had been working in alternate education for four years but had a total of eight years teaching experience. A third was in their 19th year of teaching with all but two of those years being in alternate

education. Lastly, the most experienced participant had been teaching for 28 years with all of those years being in alternate education. Two participants had teaching experiences outside of the current school district. As a result, these participants were able to provide additional insights of their experiences with collaboration.

Data Tools

Executing phenomenological inquiry involves gathering *thick* descriptions of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A semi-structured interview was conducted to maintain focus on each participant's experience with collaboration enabling detailed answers. The interview consisted of six open-ended questions (see Appendix B) that participants could review before the interview. The questions were open-ended so participants could choose which experiences they would like to share. If needed, I had extending questions prepared for participants to elaborate further about an idea. Some examples were: 'Can you tell me more about —?' or 'Can you provide an example of —?'. A key aspect of drafting the questions was to ensure that they did not lead the participants in their responses.

The interviews took place in person at a public location based on participant preferences. Once the interview was completed, participants were asked to select a pseudonym. The audio recordings from the interview were later transcribed using Otter.ai and reconciled with the audio recording. The transcriptions were also cleaned by removing the 'uhms', 'uhs', and repetitions for accuracy and readability (Flick, 2018). Then transcripts were ready for member checks to ensure that participants' ideas were accurate. The participants were given a week to approve their transcript, making changes if necessary. Once the member checks were completed, transcripts were anonymized with pseudonyms and ready for data analysis.

Data Analyses

Qualitative analyses are reflective of qualitative design: “provisional, emergent, and evolutionary” (Saldana, 2011, p. 90). Data is reflected on as it is gathered and the researcher begins to synthesize, pattern, and create connections throughout the research (Saldana, 2011). Creswell and Poth (2018) outline a method of data analysis specific to phenomenology that I followed. As previously mentioned, time was spent bracketing my assumptions and preconceptions of collaboration before listening to the interview audio recordings and reading the transcripts. I listened to the audio recordings and read the transcripts several times to identify significant statements. When personal reflections, surprises, or insights emerged from this process, I recorded these analytic memos in my journal to continue bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Saldana (2011) describes this process as becoming intimate with the data.

Coding was completed after all of the interviews were complete to avoid attempting to confirm other participants’ beliefs through later interviews. Following Saldana (2011), I approached coding as an emerging discovery, with coding serving as “heuristic—a method of discovery—to the meanings of individual sections of data” (p. 95). First-level coding allowed for significant statements to emerge, which I highlighted on each transcript. I centred the voices of participants by choosing in vivo coding using a particular word from each quote as its code, aligning with my constructivist paradigm and phenomenology (Saldana, 2011). The in vivo codes were placed in quotation marks to signify their direct connection to the words of each participant. In addition, each code was assigned a symbol to describe the context in which the code was brought up. The symbols were: + for positive, - for negative, * for suggestion, A for describing alternate education, and C for describing collaboration. The coding process was

completed for each participant separately in an Excel table. The table listed the participant, page number, direct quote, code, and symbol.

Table 1

Example of in vivo coding process

Participant	Page #	Direct Quote	Code	Symbol
Kacy	1-2	“It’s education for students who mainstream doesn’t work for, whether that’s scheduling or behaviours or needing extra one-on-one supports that they aren’t able to provide in mainstream”	“mainstream doesn’t work”	A

Once all transcripts were coded, second-level coding began where codes were combined and collapsed into similar themes for analytic reflection.

Saldana (2011) describes a ‘think display’ as an illustration of the categories and their relationships. Once the data was grouped into themes, a think display was created as a graphic representation of the data (Figure 1). An aim of this research was to understand participants' experiences of collaboration by allowing themes to emerge while using bracketing to remain open to new insights. Once themes were identified, I wrote a summary of the phenomenon of teachers’ experiences of collaboration in alternate education with a list of considerations for future planning.

Managing Bias. To manage bias, I implemented strategies from Miles et al. (2014). Due to the small sample size and single school site, this research was to inform a specific context (Miles et al., 2014). Being transparent about my biases and assumptions prior to conducting research enables readers to evaluate my trustworthiness when analyzing data. As previously mentioned, bracketing continued throughout the research process to ensure that my voice was

being put aside to bring participant voices forward. I asked participants to member check their transcripts to ensure their voices were accurately portrayed. My supervisor also read through my codes in reference to quotes to consider whether my beliefs were interfering with or misrepresenting the data. When quotes of significance surfaced, participants were asked for approval to use them in the results. Throughout the research process, my journal allowed me to reflect on my own expectations, ‘ahas’, and surprises. For example, the first participant I interviewed provided a historical overview of the progression of collaboration from its initial implementation to the present day. This was a pleasant surprise and provided me with context as I progressed through the subsequent interviews. I used several strategies to increase the trustworthiness of my interpretation of the data.

Strength of Study. Denzin and Lincoln’s (2000) triple crisis of representation, legitimization, and praxis was used to ground this research. Representation ensures participants are not being objectified (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Representation in this research was ensured by enabling participants to choose their own pseudonyms, asking open-ended questions so participants could let their experiences drive the interview, and where appropriate, direct quotes were used as evidence in the participant's voice. This kept the participants’ voices at the forefront and represented accurately. Legitimization evaluates the trustworthiness of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). To legitimize this research, the interview questions were accessible, allowing for study replication. I used an in vivo coding process to create connections that were eventually grouped into themes. Examples of this process were described in the data analyses to legitimize the research results. Praxis refers to the research being useable moving forward (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As this research used a small set of data from teachers at the same school, I acknowledge that they may not be a representative sample. The findings, therefore, cannot

generalize the experiences of collaboration in alternate education; however, they informed my own planning for collaboration in the future.

Hearing the experiences of teachers around their perceptions of collaboration was enlightening. I appreciated their candor and willingness to share both positive and negative experiences to answer the question: What are teachers' perceptions of collaboration in an alternate education setting? The four participants' perspectives of collaboration are overviewed and outlined through theme groupings in the results section that follows.

Results

Collaboration in education settings is a unique process that does not have a 'one size fits all' structure. There is a wide range of what individuals describe as 'effective' collaboration and 'ineffective' collaboration. I was curious to learn about teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of collaboration in an alternate education setting. Teachers also have different perceptions of the goals of collaboration. As Rhys stated, "I've come to realize that I'm one person of many, right? And that what I might like, others may not like," understanding that not every experience of this phenomenon will be effective in their eyes.

Through the participants' voices, I discovered similar themes that emerged from the study data that included definitions of collaboration, experiences of collaboration, and suggestions for the future. While many similarities surfaced, there were also opposing voices within the themes. Specifically, teachers' comments indicated tensions around their voice and choice regarding collaboration. Participants expressed the importance of relevance and applicability to their context and students. Prior to exploring the experiences of collaboration,

there is value in identifying the tenets of collaboration based on the lived experiences and perceptions of these teachers.

Defining Collaboration

Describing definitions of collaboration was the preface within interviews to discussing participants' experiences with collaboration. Participants outlined collaboration in four themes: togetherness, relevance, professional learning, and collaborative communities. Understanding their ideals and expectations for collaboration provided a glimpse into the foundation for their perceptions.

Togetherness

Each participant described collaboration as a process involving togetherness. Hailey mentioned, "to me the word collaboration means coming together as a whole, learning from one another and teaching one another." Similarly, Kacy stated, "I find collaboration to be putting different ideas together, but with different groups of people." The concept of connecting with different individuals was echoed again in Sally's comment about "all the different professionals working together, to do what's best for the child and that kind of environment." In some instances, the participants also referred to collaboration with people in the community who support students in alternate education such as social workers, mental health clinicians, various counselling services, and employment agencies. Collectively, the participants characterized togetherness as a sense of wholeness, as well as professionals working and learning together.

Relevance

A second theme that emerged through the interviews was relevance. Relevance was present in each conversation and participants placed a high value on the relevance of collaboration as their time is valuable to them. Working in alternate education, there are specific

areas of need that may not apply to mainstream schools. For Rhys, there was an emphasis on “everything that is done is used and has a practical application or purpose.” Rhys later added, “you really have to make sure that [collaboration] is, in fact, applicable and that teachers relate to something that could be useful to them.” Hailey also supported the idea of collaboration having a purpose “to remind staff that collaboration is for us to collaborate, but ultimately, we’re trying to collaborate as a staff to better help our students.” Sally also agreed on using collaboration for cultivating student success in alternate school settings, providing them with the “skills they need, practically and professionally, and all the resources and everything.” The relevance of collaboration was important both to the learning for staff, as well as the support of student success.

Professional Learning

The third tenet of collaboration that emerged through participants’ voices was professional learning. Rhys described collaboration as “people that are willing to come together and share ideas, share ways to do things, keep with goals in mind that you know, become better and more efficient, better at what we do, as a profession better” looking at professional learning as becoming more effective in practice. Sally, on the other hand, said “we have to, as professionals, collaborate with the community, to give the kids the best chance.” Sally’s perception of professional learning involved looking at serving the students more “holistically” by allowing supports from the community to collaborate with the school staff to become more effective. While Rhys and Sally expressed different ideas of what professional learning involves, they both indicated that it involved growing in their professional capacities.

Collaborative Communities

Within a school that has a weekly collaboration structure, the individuals have an opportunity to build a sense of community. Hailey expressed that for successful collaboration to occur “all people need to be included within that time, in order for all members to feel value, and for other members to see everybody being valued, and their time being valued.” Hailey’s comment suggests that she placed a high emphasis on the individual and their time being valued. She later added that it was important to have a sense of “respect and understanding” during collaboration. Collaboration is also a space for “collective reflection” and a time to “air concerns” (Rhys). Hailey described her mental visual of collaboration:

I think about it as a large circle of learning and nobody is at the forefront of that circle, we're all equals within it, able to share our ideas, able to share our knowledge, and all able to learn from one another, and to work together and support one another in our learning.

Hailey’s words encapsulate the essence of a community: participants as equals, sharing ideas and knowledge, as well as support. During this conversation, it was clear that this was a utopic view of collaboration and not reflective of all participants’ experiences.

Experiences of Collaboration

This research project aimed to highlight the experiences of collaboration in alternate education. While exploring participants' experiences of this phenomenon, tensions quickly surfaced. Within each theme, participants described experiences of both effective and ineffective collaboration. The analysis process pointed to two stages shaping participants' experiences. The initial stage included what happens in preparation for collaboration, while the second includes what happens during collaboration. Therefore, the experiences of collaboration are summarized

in three categories: planning for collaboration, attitudes of collaboration, and engaging in collaboration.

Planning for Collaboration

Planning for collaboration involved a wide range of experiences. Rhys's experience revealed that they are "always asked at the teacher department meetings, if we have anything that we would like, you know, on the agenda, or in the collaboration side of things." Kacy also felt that "we're definitely asked, what do you guys want to see? A lot of it does get covered."

Planning involved moving from just hearing what teachers want to implementing their suggestions. As the administrators were the final decision-makers in the planning process, Rhys shared "the admin listens and they try to actively seek out your thoughts on a particular topic or subject or what is needed," echoing the experiences of Kacy. As a structural note, Sally added that in this particular year of collaboration, the administrators would "chunk" time together in the schedule for working on bigger projects that may take more than one session. Three participants shared their perceptions of effective planning for collaboration to include not only surveying teachers for suggestions but also implementing those suggestions, in addition to planning to have subsequent collaboration sessions to complete larger projects.

Contrary to Rhys's current experiences of collaboration, in prior years "there was no ability at all to make a decision as to what we wanted to do." They used the word "top-down" on multiple occasions to describe ineffective experiences of collaboration. Sally also described "admin-directed" experiences and "rigid" structures of collaboration. Sally went as far as to call some collaboration sessions "staff meetings" if they were devoid of the teachers' input. The experiences of ineffective collaboration among participants seemed to result from a lack of

teacher voice, flexibility, and instances of collaboration being driven solely by the administrators.

Interestingly, participants expressed varying accounts of their experiences regarding planning for collaboration. Both Rhys and Kacy felt that staff are asked for their input for the planning process; however, Kacy also shared “the problem is that we need to give ideas three months in advance.” Kacy further explained that “something comes up the week before or that month that we want to work on, but we don't know that yet,” suggesting that the frequency of input is not always timely. Sally also disclosed “[teachers] don't take the opportunity to put in their two cents” when asked, which was expressed with frustration. In another differing experience, Sally appreciated when time was chunked together for projects. However, Kacy used the word “excessive” to describe some of these overlapping collaboration topics. Hailey also found that “topics often get dragged out for longer collaboration sessions than they were originally planned for” suggesting that it was not a useful way to spend her collaboration time. Whether or not teachers felt collaboration was useful led to the development of different attitudes related to collaboration.

Attitudes of Collaboration

Among the experiences participants shared, there was a clear distinction between their experiences and their thoughts or feelings toward collaboration. Sally's voice inspired the emergence of this theme as she shared, “I don't think any of [collaboration] is not super useful or applicable. I think it's really more of an attitude around it” when describing her perception of collaboration. There were both positive and negative attitudes expressed by participants that were further divided into two subthemes: attitudes toward collaboration and attitudes toward colleagues.

Attitudes Toward Collaboration. Participants were quick to praise the current climate of collaboration when comparing their experiences to the earlier years at Briteside. Participants used words such as “engaging” (Rhys), “an opportunity,” and “grateful for time” (Sally) to describe their positive attitudes toward collaboration. Sally’s comment that “[administrators] asked us what we want, and it has been much more free” implies a more positive outlook on collaboration time. Despite having some positive attitudes, there was still a “negative connotation” (Rhys) around collaboration. “Frustration” (Rhys) crept into the conversation as participants viewed some collaboration as “not applicable” (Kacy; Rhys; Sally) or thought “I don’t think this will work” (Rhys) which became the most prevalent opposing attitude towards collaboration. Participants continued to invalidate the value of collaboration when describing the absence of colleagues during collaboration or even by them simply leaving early from a collaboration session (Hailey; Rhys; Sally). Some of the feelings towards collaboration consisted of feeling “indifferent” (Rhys) and hearing voices “whine and complain” (Sally). The attitudes towards collaboration ranged from feeling grateful for the opportunity to participate to frustration regarding the irrelevance, and the lack of participation caused by teacher absences and teachers leaving collaboration sessions early.

Attitudes Toward Colleagues. When discussing participants' experiences, they did not explicitly state, for example, 'I feel this way about my colleagues' but rather they described behaviours of colleagues that led me to group the behaviours as the participants' perceptions of their thoughts or feelings. Hailey expressed the importance of being “treated as equals” on three separate occasions as a noteworthy example. Sally also described feeling part of a “team”, being “in a group of colleagues that are like-minded and focused”, and working with colleagues that are “on board” as a positive experience with colleagues. On the other hand, there were many

accounts of negative experiences with colleagues. Hailey recounted, “Often when I think of collaboration, I think of a room of teachers together and feelings of not wanting to be together.” Rhys went as far as to say that in some instances “others are arguing, and sometimes it's your peers that you don't agree with, the way they're conducting themselves,” but that he would try to stay out of it. Sally felt that many of her colleagues did not want to “do more than what's required” despite being given the time during collaboration to complete the work. She also suggested that “not everyone can be trusted” with unstructured time as they would “misuse” the time provided. With clashing attitudes towards colleagues during collaboration, I began to wonder how that affects the act of collaborating. The attitudes of collaboration are a preface to the act of engaging in collaboration.

Engaging in Collaboration

Engaging in collaboration involves what happens during collaboration time through the lived experiences of the participants. The most impactful interactions were described as a time to “reconnect” (Hailey) and be “reflective” (Rhys). Rhys emphasized that collaboration “always has to be pragmatic and useful” (Rhys) while Sally valued the time “to create something useful.” While the concept of something being 'useful' may not be the same for all involved, however, participants were able to describe tangible characteristics. Kacy found collaboration time useful when she “can use that information to help [her] students” and when she was able to apply it to her “classroom focus.” Similarly, Rhys repeated that “looking at it and applying it to your own situation” enhances how useful something is. Engaging in collaboration can look like “sharing ideas” (Rhys), gathering “feedback” (Kacy), and exploring “resources” (Kacy). Although positively engaging in collaboration can take many forms, the most impactful aspect that

surfaced from participants' experiences engaging with collaboration was the ability to apply what was happening during collaboration to the individual's classroom or teaching context.

When describing times when collaboration was not applicable, for Hailey, it starts with collaboration having "no specific intention." She then added that in some cases "I would describe collaboration right now as a bit of a task. A task that doesn't include everybody and doesn't reflect my definition of collaboration." Hailey continued to describe the optics of collaboration as people being "separate," "by themselves," and in their "individual room to work." Her description created an image of alienation. Kacy and Hailey shared a common experience of a lack of follow-through on projects or ideas. This resonated more deeply with Hailey as she posed the question, "How are you supposed to work with people who don't have accountability?" Hailey's experience was the most prominent example of negative experiences with engaging in collaboration. Her perspective was rooted in her expectations of collaboration not being met. Both Kacy and Hailey felt that a lack of follow-through from teachers and accountability created frustrating experiences when engaging in collaboration.

Participants were asked to share noteworthy experiences of collaboration. Rhys shared that there is "nothing worse than getting theory. And theory stops there." Others provided examples of 'why' collaboration was useful rather than 'what' was useful. One of the collaboration topics that was noted by Kacy, Sally, and Rhys was bringing in "outside agencies" from the community. As many students access support from various agencies, teachers need to know how to connect with them. Sally expressed how important community presentations are as "we don't always know what's out there and they change so fast, like what's available, what's not available anymore." Time to work on Ministry designations, which in most cases provides increased support for students through additional district funding, was also brought up as a

prevalent collaboration topic, as all students at the school require an IEP (Hailey; Sally). Kacy valued collaboration topics that provided “trainings that you get a certificate from,” as they are not only relevant to the profession but the cost is covered by the school as well. Other topics described were centred around the specific interests of the participant expressing the importance of relevance when planning for future collaboration time. Overall, engaging in collaboration can exemplify a variety of experiences. Noteworthy experiences with collaboration included ones that were relevant to the individual and provided time to create something applicable to their classrooms; however, their experiences also included examples of seclusion and a lack of accountability.

Possibilities for Future Collaboration

Collaboration, like any process, has advantages and weaknesses. An important aspect of creating a more effective system is the ability to review and refine its process. In terms of this research, surveying teachers about what they would like to see for collaboration time to improve was a crucial ‘next step.’ Their voices can now lead to recommendations for the future planning of collaboration. Participants' insights for creating more effective collaboration time surfaced three possibilities for future collaboration: restructuring collaboration, increasing voice and choice, and creating a culture of accountability.

Restructuring Collaboration

Restructuring collaboration references planning how the time during collaboration will be spent. Hailey proposed a potential routine that allowed time for staff to “reconnect” with each other before getting into the topic of the day. The ability to reconnect supports the idea of togetherness, bringing staff together after a week of being potentially isolated within their

teaching spaces. Hailey emphasized “starting and ending together and sharing together is important” when collaborating. Hailey returned to the idea of a circle by sharing:

I think a lot of collaborations could be more successful in that space, if we start in a different way. Going back to my idea of in that circle but having the people within that circle value it, and value its intentions within that space.

A circle's construction allows all participating members to be seen without a single focal point, allowing everyone to reconnect. Hailey's interpretation of the circle also enables an intention to be set which can focus the collaboration time. She suggests that starting in a circle is not quite sufficient, but “coming back and sharing partway through... because we would be able to see groups that maybe weren't on the right track of what the intention was” providing a check-in point. Restructuring the beginning and end routines of collaboration was a starting point when rethinking how time is spent during collaboration.

Briteside's collaboration time includes professional learning through presentations, certifications, and developing or creating resources. In some instances, participants expressed their frustration with a “top-down” (Rhys) and “admin-directed” (Sally) style of collaboration. Hailey acknowledges “having that top-down conversation, which I know is something that is going to happen, it's just something you can't get away from because some information pieces need to happen,” in addition to posing the question, “How can we restructure it to not just be that in the same session?” While there was no definitive answer to that question, other participants suggested various groupings that could provide benefits in the working time of collaboration. Sally stated, “I don't think there should be more than groups of two because I don't think more than two people actually get work done, personally” suggesting that pairs are an effective grouping structure. Within a potential grouping, consideration should be given to “grouping like-

mindful people ... even if you're not in the same subject areas" (Hailey) to create cross-curricular opportunities. Participants revealed that there should be intentional consideration of whom they are collaborating with and how many collaborators are in a group.

In terms of the style of activities during collaboration, Rhys said that "we need more variety, we need a variety of topics. And it doesn't always have to be in the class," expressing the importance of not only the topics but the location as well. Sally suggested that the ideal collaboration requires "other schools in the district to collaborate with us, to give our kids chances to get the hands-on stuff" regarding electives involving trades such as automotive, woodshop, and metal fabrication because Briteside is not equipped to run those programs. Kacy agreed, "I think it might be cool to go to other schools and see what they do for collab. See how it's different from us and how they use their time," referencing other alternative programs within the area. As Briteside works closely with many community resources, Kacy also hoped that during collaboration they could be "given time to go make those connections" and build relationships with potential community partners which would result in better support for students. Their insight suggests moving collaboration out of the building and into other schools and the community to help increase variety.

Increasing Voice and Choice

While aiming to increase the level of engagement during collaboration, participants identified increasing their voice as an area for improvement. Hailey stated that "asking staff for some input would be a suggestion I have for increasing staff engagement." She also suggested asking staff "what would they like to collaborate and learn throughout the year," potentially through a "staff survey" as a key to planning. Similarly, Rhys recommended a "feedback form" that could allow for more continuous input as collaboration time progresses. Gathering

continuous feedback would also address Kacy's desire for more "flexibility" in the schedule.

Kacy hopes that more time can be allotted for:

activities that are relevant to our school. If our school needs something, we should be allowed to figure out, this is what we're missing, how can we take the steps to figure do it, and then be given the time to actually follow through on those steps.

In the current system, the lack of flexibility does not allow for the teachers to create timely materials when needed. Kacy took it further to raise a concern about the amount of time provided within the schedule for staff ideas by saying, "We can have as many good ideas as we want, but if you don't have the time to actually do them then it's not really beneficial to talk about."

Overall, participants expressed hope for more continuous opportunities to share their input rather than at set times throughout the year.

In addition to increasing voice, participants suggested that increasing choice could also improve their experiences of collaboration. Kacy stated "If we had choice and who we're working with and what we're working on, I think that would be more helpful" to increase her productivity. She further explained her rationale: "If we can work on projects that are relevant to us or if we can work with people who make sense to collaborate with" placing emphasis again on not only what she is collaborating about but with whom she is collaborating. During collaboration there could be potential for "even allowing during collab time, [for] different people to work on different things" (Kacy), revealing a more individualized approach to collaboration rather than a whole group activity. Hailey suggested a similar idea by proposing having "multiple options within collaboration" for teachers to choose from. She mentioned, "For myself, it would be interesting to have collaboration with multiple topics so that people who require one component of knowledge could attend that while another group attend something

else,” potentially allowing a more relevant experience for everyone. She did acknowledge that there would be potential hurdles in that format of collaboration; however, proposing multiple topics for a single session creates a potential solution to increasing participants’ choice in collaboration. Kacy and Hailey provided a unique perspective on creating more choice in collaboration by allowing teachers to work on different topics within the same session of collaboration, along with being able to choose the people with whom they collaborate.

Creating Accountability

Creating a form of accountability was the most prominent suggestion from participants. It became clear to me, as the researcher, that there was minimal to no form of accountability in their current process. Suggestions included a simple form of accountability, starting with “Maybe even staff being held accountable in some sort of way. Asking 'what have you been working on?'" (Kacy). Hailey suggested that “it would be very helpful to have an administrator create some form of accountability for individuals and groups.” She later added, “It would be nice to have an administrator attend the groups and connect with the individuals in that group” as the Vice Principal oversees and organizes collaboration. Sally noted that if teachers were asked to present at a collaboration “it made [them] accountable for that part of collab,” adding to her previous suggestion of teachers presenting something they are passionate about or working on. The hope is that “Once that has been established and there is a culture around that, then I think that staff would be able to hold other staff members more accountable within their group” (Hailey). Participants were able to identify a variety of ways to introduce accountability into collaboration, starting by checking in with groups, increasing the presence of an administrator, and having teachers present during a collaboration session. This could lead to creating a culture of accountability that could potentially stem from the teachers themselves.

Kacy proposed an idea supporting the notion of accountability by suggesting the creation of an “outcome.” She proposed that “you could put in almost an outline of what you're planning on doing, and then submit an actual proposal for what you're going to work on, and your timeline, and then what your outcome is going to be.” When probing more about what an outcome would include, her explanation was, “What's expected of you and how you're going to show that” as part of the initial proposal. Kacy's idea provides more voice and choice, while also expanding on the level of accountability. She acknowledged that there are details that would need to be sorted out; however, creating a proposal could be a starting point.

After analyzing the participants’ experiences, there were many similarities as well as tensions between narratives. They presented ideas that could create a more effective environment for collaboration in the future. Their experiences highlighted that engaging in collaboration itself can be a complicated process, with many factors influencing the perceptions of those involved. Some of those factors stem from an individual's definitions of collaboration, togetherness, relevance to context, professional learning, and collaborative communities. The participants’ experiences of collaboration were influenced by planning for collaboration, attitudes towards collaboration, and engaging in collaboration. Lastly, they provided suggestions for collaboration, including restructuring collaboration, increasing voice and choice, as well as creating accountability. Next, the existing literature regarding collaboration is revisited while highlighting the results of participants' lived experiences.

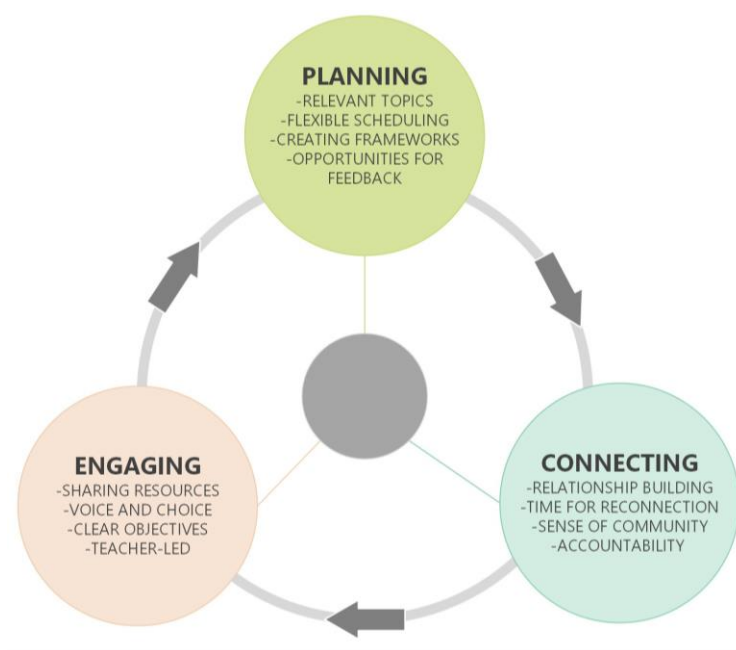
Discussion

This study aimed to better understand teachers’ experiences of collaboration in alternate education. As I worked with the data, a visual emerged that illustrates my understanding of the

connections between participants' voices. The results of my analysis suggest that collaboration can be viewed as a cycle (Figure 1). Viewing collaboration as a cycle demonstrates the interconnectedness of each stage. Each stage provides valuable learning to better support the next step. Collaboration, particularly at Briteside, rarely has a beginning and an end. In fact, Hailey similarly used the visual of a circle to explain her understanding of collaboration. The staff's process of collaboration builds from session to session, as well as from year to year. After analyzing the data and reviewing existing literature, there are three themes to explore further in proposing a cycle of collaboration: planning for collaboration, connecting in collaboration, and frameworks for engaging in collaboration.

Figure 1

Cycle of Collaboration



Planning

Planning tends to be viewed as the initial step in a process of collaboration. This may be true; however, once the cycle of collaboration begins, planning becomes intertwined within the

process rather than an initial starting point each time. Although the existing academic literature does not provide any definitive concepts as to how to plan collaboration time, there are many ideas as to what occurs within collaboration that could inform planning.

As previously noted when describing collaboration, contrived collegiality can often take the form of collaboration (Hargreaves, 1994). This style of collaboration is directed by administrators, predictable, implementation-oriented, and mandatory (Datnow, 2011). In some instances when participants were expressing frustration, they included examples of contrived collegiality: top-down, admin-directed, no choice, a rigid schedule, and there was less buy-in from teachers. There was an acknowledgement that, in some cases, a top-down orientation of collaboration may be needed to share information; but it should not consume the entire session of collaboration. Despite some of the participants' frustrations with contrived collegiality, there were other forms of collaboration occurring at Briteside.

The emphasis on planning has been to create more opportunities for feedback. Datnow (2011) suggests that creating a culture of collaboration can stem from providing opportunities for feedback. This aligns with participants' hopes to share their ideas to help plan for future collaborations. Feedback can take many forms and is valuable in informing how to plan for effective collaboration. Increasing the frequency of feedback allows for a stronger 'teacher-voice' in collaboration, shifting away from contrived collegiality and toward collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Similarly, Campbell (2017) suggests creating effective learning environments considers learning design, support, and sustainability. By implementing regular feedback, there is more opportunity to hear about the supports that are needed. In this study, collaboration is conceptualized as a cycle to support the notion of sustainability.

In learning more about collaboration, a question continues to surface: Who is collaboration for? Is collaboration for the administrators to plan the agenda based on what they would like the school to focus on, is it for the teachers to learn more about an area that benefits their practice, or is it to increase student achievement? Can collaboration simultaneously serve all three groups of people? In this study, collaboration was driven by administrators, with influence from the teachers, for the teacher's professional learning, to hopefully better serve their students. There is yet to be a perfect equation to balance the needs of all three groups of people, however, considering the needs of each group during the planning process can enhance the experiences in collaboration.

Connecting

When teachers are asked to collaborate, there is an aspect of vulnerability amongst individuals as they are being asked to share their ideas and practices, thereby opening themselves to potential critique. A key component of building a safe professional learning environment is relationship building and developing trust amongst those involved. Developing a culture of collaboration could create a stronger connection with participants, thus building a sturdy foundation for effective collaboration.

Research suggests that developing a culture of collaboration sparks creativity and can build trust through the process of connecting with colleagues (Howard, 2019). These positive connections for participants in this study were described when they felt part of a team, were treated as equals, and were with like-minded colleagues. In contrast, participants found collaboration challenging when they felt excluded or as if their role or needs were not considered. Teaching is a busy profession, and throughout the week there are many times when you are not able to connect with everyone in the building. Using collaboration as a time for

reconnection and growing relationships benefits the effectiveness of collaboration. The professional learning needs of individuals are diverse. An aspect of meeting those needs to continue learning is through support and sustainability (Campbell, 2017). In a culture of collaboration, all participating colleagues are in a network of support if strong connections are built.

Enhancing accountability was among the top suggestions for future collaboration from Briteside participants. Introducing more opportunities for colleagues to share their progress or learning during collaboration time would address the desire for a form of accountability. This aligns with research from Havnes (2009) who found patterns of interaction amongst colleagues when collaborating: preserving individualism, coordination, cooperation, and sharing. Increasing the level of sharing or developing a culture of sharing illustrates the learning occurring during collaboration. In a sense, sharing creates a level of engagement by creating an outcome for collaboration. These outcomes could range from a sentence summary to a small presentation of their learning to sharing a created lesson. Meirink et al. (2007) identify seven configurations of learning environments that were evident in their study of collaboration. The configuration most significant to participants was valuing colleagues' teaching methods. Similarly, participants in this study suggested having collaboration sessions led by a teacher or small group to share lessons or practices that are working in their classroom. Building a community of practice is important and connected to how individuals engage in collaboration.

Engaging

When describing engaging in collaboration, the focus is on what actually happens during collaboration activities and how collaboration is taking place. Collaboration can be a valuable opportunity, especially if done within regular teaching hours when there is dedicated time for

teachers to come together to learn, create, play, and brainstorm ways to better the education of alternate students. From reviewing the literature on collaboration it was clear that there is a large variance in what collaboration can look like. There is no single definition that researchers agreed upon; but rather, similar concepts that produce various models for collaborating. This was echoed by the participants as they shared diverse ideas as to what collaboration is: togetherness, relevance, professional learning, and collaborative communities. There is no ‘one size fits all’ model for collaboration, but rather a plethora of options to serve the needs of collaboration in a specific context.

Hargreaves and O’Connor (2018) describe a shift in PLCs moving the focus of collaboration away from student achievement and towards the whole development of the student. In this aspect, Briteside engages in a third-generation PLC model, supporting the development of the whole student focusing on curriculum, employment development, mental health, and other areas of students’ lives that may not be within the purview of a mainstream school. When looking at the roles of a teacher in alternate education, in some cases they are required to teach a variety of subject areas to a variety of grade levels in both teacher and student-paced formats. In both the present experiences of Briteside’s collaboration and their hopes for future collaboration, participants describe working in cross-curricular groups to build curriculum together. This describes aspects of Havnes's (2009) concept of an ITT. While Briteside's collaboration aligns with aspects of existing frameworks for collaboration, such as PLCs and ITTs, there may be value in developing a specific collaboration protocol to suit their needs.

These concepts demonstrate the interconnectedness of frameworks for collaboration within the literature. For myself, the importance of context and purpose will determine which model may be used to engage in collaboration. The importance of context was largely absent

from the literature; however, researchers describe the importance of a culture of collaboration, which takes time to develop (Havnes, 2009). Many experiences described by participants in this study expressed the importance of relevance, applicability to classrooms, and pragmatism. This further supports the notion that context is significant when creating a culture of collaboration. The location, people, and goals of the school should all be taken into consideration when engaging in collaboration.

Limitations

As this study included a small participant sample from a single school, the findings cannot be generalized to reflect teachers' perspectives and experiences of collaboration in all alternate education contexts. However, it may be used to further understandings of collaboration within alternate education schools with a similar structure. The purposeful sample consisted of four participants which limits the transferability of the findings. Since participants volunteered to participate in this study, the interview data is inherently subjective. There is a possibility that more tensions between voices may have surfaced if participants who did not volunteer were included in the research.

Curating meaningful open-ended questions for the interviews was a deliberate research strategy. However, given time constraints around participant availability, I limited my interview protocol to six questions, which did not include inquiring into the culture of collaboration. One participant mentioned the culture of collaboration but provided limited details regarding what that meant to them. In hindsight, I wish I could now ask participants more about their perspectives of the culture of collaboration. The interviews were also limited to one session per participant. A follow-up interview would have enabled me to clarify an idea or go deeper into a

concept that I may not have initially explored in the first interview. While this made the study more manageable, an additional interview could have provided richer dialogue.

Despite these limitations, exploring collaboration in alternate education is identified as an area for further study. More participants wanted to share their experiences than this study was able to accommodate. Another area for further study could be to survey the structures of collaboration or absence of collaboration in alternate education settings across British Columbia. Even with these various limitations, the research provided me with a more well-rounded understanding of teachers' experiences with collaboration.

Implications and Recommendations

Despite the limitations of this study, the findings from this research can contribute to recommendations for further research in this field, significant implications for my own teaching practice, and recommendations specifically for Briteside Learning Centre's collaboration team.

First, additional research into collaboration across various alternate education schools should be examined to see what other stories teachers share. Are the results from this research similar to the experiences of other alternate education teachers? The current literature on collaboration lacks directly mentioning the importance of context, thus there is limited exposure in alternate education. Is there a specific model of collaboration that could be developed for alternate education? During collaboration, there is an interesting dynamic between collaboration and the administrator role versus collaboration and the teacher role. Who is collaboration for, and who decides what to collaborate about? The idea of who is 'in charge' of collaboration and the effect that this has on the act of collaborating is an area for further research. In this study, interviews were conducted to gather information for evaluating the experiences of collaboration.

Further research could suggest a more effective tool for gathering similar information. Although the generality of the current results must be established by future research, the present study has provided a clear need for further research in alternate education.

Secondly, participants provided insights into ways that collaboration could be more effective for them. This study suggests there is inconsistency in the structure or 'shape' of collaboration time. Some of the hopes for future collaboration were accountability, time to connect with others, and more opportunities for feedback. Proposing a new system or potential protocol for collaboration could create a consistent routine that would touch on the participants' hopes for future collaboration. A potential protocol could include:

1. Members start in small groups to share out and reconnect with their colleagues. If needed, guiding questions or topics can be provided.
2. The facilitator of collaboration shares the focus and intention for the collaboration with clear learning objectives for the time.
3. A substantial amount of time is provided for the workshop, learning, or work time as a whole group or in smaller groups of their choosing.
4. Near the end of the collaboration time, all members return together as a whole group to share their takeaways or progress.
5. Lastly, the school-based facilitator can either have an open discussion for feedback or create a feedback form for each person to complete. During this process, members should be able to provide feedback on the activity, share anything that needs to be addressed, and indicate if they have suggestions for future collaboration sessions.

By using the protocol mentioned, or a similar process, there would be time for reconnection, time to engage in collaboration, a sense of accountability due to the responsibility of sharing their

progress or learning, as well as providing an opportunity for participants to offer feedback on collaboration sessions. By having multiple points of connection between the facilitator and the other individuals participating in collaboration, there are opportunities to identify if a session is ineffective or perceived to be not a useful way to spend time. This protocol also provides feedback on each session to be used for future planning. Creating a weekly routine for collaboration time has the potential to serve the diverse needs of the individuals participating in collaboration.

Overall, the participants in this study appreciated and valued having collaboration time scheduled within their teaching hours. While their experiences reflected both positive and negative aspects of collaboration, they all expressed that collaboration helps them better serve their students. While hearing about the experiences of collaboration is important, the next step is finding ways to positively move forward. In summary, the recommendations I would offer Briteside Learning Centre based on the insights gained from participants and a review of the existing literature include:

1. Continue to have a variety of topics and types of activities within the collaboration schedule.
2. Continue to implement collaboration activities that teachers ask for while allowing for an appropriate amount of time to complete the activities.
3. Actively seek suggestions and feedback regarding collaboration throughout the year to allow for a more responsive schedule.
4. Increase the level of accountability within collaboration. This could start from the administration to eventually create a culture of accountability among teachers.

5. Consider allowing teachers to work on different topics within a single collaboration session. Examples of this could include providing two options, creating a choice board, or allowing teachers to submit a proposal for their collaboration time that involves achieving a specific outcome.
6. Provide more opportunities for teachers to choose with whom they will work with during collaboration.

While these recommendations are not an exhaustive list, they integrate the positive aspects of collaboration to continue, as well as areas for improvement. From my understanding, Briteside has continued to develop their planning for collaboration and actively works with all involved in hopes of creating a worthwhile experience of collaboration.

Conclusion

This research stemmed from my interest in teamwork and my desire to hear more about individual experiences. As I have developed in my career, I have always felt the need to add alternate education into the conversation. In many district-level meetings, or even speaking with colleagues within the district where I work, alternate education is not well understood. From my own experiences, I wanted to bring the voices of alternate educators to the conversation. Thus, my research aimed to answer: What are teachers' perceptions of collaboration in alternate education?

Through this phenomenological study, I have gained valuable insight into collaboration and a new perspective when working with colleagues. Through the interview process, I was able to connect with teachers whom I may not have chosen to spend that time with otherwise; it allowed me to have focused and honest conversations. Through those conversations, I was able to build more trust with peers; and in turn, understand how to work with them better. The

teachers were very thankful to be given the chance to share their voices, and it was very rewarding for me to provide that opportunity for them. As a first-time researcher, this was a very enlightening experience. From start to finish, this project has allowed me to continue my learning, grow as an individual, and contribute to this profession.

Alternate education may be a small corner of public education; however, it plays a critical role. Alternate education serves the needs of the most vulnerable youth in the education system by attempting to re-engage them with school through supporting their social and emotional wellness. Due to the complex needs of alternate education students, establishing effective collaboration amongst school staff and other agencies is crucial to the success and well-being of the students. I hope that this research will help keep alternate education in the conversation. In addition, I hope the teachers at Briteside Learning Centre feel valued and empowered through sharing their stories, because without them, this research would not have been possible. Lastly, I hope that Briteside can find merit from this research in further developing their collaboration time.

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Appendix A

Ethics Approval



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Human Research Ethics Board - Certificate of Ethical Approval

HREB Protocol No: 101183

Principal Investigator: Mandelyn Erikson

Team Members: Mandelyn Erikson (Principal Investigator)

Ms. Anne Hales (Supervisor)

Title: Alternate Education Teachers' Perceptions of Collaboration

Department: Faculty of Education, Community & Human Development\Teacher Education

Effective: November 21, 2022

Expiry: November 20, 2023

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 or research team 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.
6. A Final Report Event Form must be submitted to the HREB when the research is complete or terminated.

*Please note a Research Continuity Plan is no longer required.

Thank you, and all the best with your research.

UFV Human Research Ethics Board

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

[Script:] Before we start, I wanted to thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. I also want to remind you that you can decide what you will share in this interview. If any question brings up feelings of discomfort, you can decline to answer or stop the interview completely. Following the interview, the transcript will be emailed to you for your approval.

1. Tell me about your teaching experience in alternate education. For example: How long have you been teaching; how many of those years have been in alternate education? What classes or subject areas have you taught in alternate education? How do you define alternate education?
2. What does the term “collaboration” mean to you?
3. What are some experiences from the collaboration at your school that positively stand out for you? Why do you view these experiences as noteworthy?
4. Can you recall a time when collaboration was not useful or applicable? If so, are you able to explain how the structure or type of activity was not useful or applicable?
5. Are there specific recommendations you have for collaboration that would help the time be more beneficial?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add?

[Script:] Thank you so much for your time and participation. Once I have transcribed the audio recording, I will send the transcript to you for your approval.