ELEMENTARY TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES THAT MOST EFFECTIVELY PROMOTE AND SUPPORT COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my parents. Their love, guidance, and endless support have helped me to achieve this dream. Thank you.

ABSTRACT

As a teacher working in a small or single-graded school and partaking in collaborative professional learning I became curious what teachers in a similar context perceived as valuable strategies leaders could use to promote and support collaborative professional learning. In seeking to answer the question "What are the perceptions of teachers in small or single-graded schools of the ways in which leaders can effectively promote and support collaborative professional learning?" I interviewed seven teachers from small or single-graded schools, using semi-structured interviews, and collected their perceptions and experiences. I used a multi-step thematic coding process to organize the data into themes. From the analysis I found that teachers perceived the following strategies for leaders to employ in effectively promoting and supporting collaborative professional learning: engaging in professional learning alongside teachers; implementing newly learned pedagogical practices in the classroom alongside the teachers; allowing teachers freedom of choice in pursuing collaborative professional learning; providing time and resources to teachers to pursue collaborative professional learning; putting themselves on the forefront of trying new pedagogical practices and modeling them for teachers; and supporting teachers in their collaborative professional learning endeavors.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CRM	Collaborative Response Model
CST	Classroom Support Teacher
CTM	Collaborative Team Meeting
LQS	Leadership Quality Standard
M.Ed	Master of Education
OLE	Optimal Learning Environment
TPGP	Teacher Professional Growth Plan
TQS	Teacher Quality Standard

CHAPTER ONE: CONTEXT

Under Alberta Education's *Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy* (Government of Alberta, 2015), every teacher employed by a school authority or Early Childhood Services operation is required to annually create and maintain a Teacher Professional Growth Plan (TPGP). The policy defines teacher professional growth as a "career-long learning process whereby a teacher… develops and implements a plan to achieve professional learning" (Government of Alberta, 2015, p. 3). As directed by the *Teaching Quality Standard* (TQS), teachers are expected to engage in career-long professional learning and critical reflection to improve their practice (Government of Alberta, 2018b). Therefore, a teacher's TPGP must pertain to goals or objectives determined through the assessment of student learning needs, demonstrate a relationship to the TQS, consider the educational plans of the school, school authority, and the government, and be shared with a supervisor or principal (Government of Alberta, 2015). A strategy encouraged by the TQS to assist in achieving career-long learning and TPGP goals is collaboration (Government of Alberta, 2018b). Teachers can demonstrate their progress by "collaborating with other teachers to build personal and collective…capacities; seeking out feedback; and support[ing] student success in…learning environments" (Government of Alberta, 2018b, p. 4).

Professional Context

Since entering the teaching profession, I have engaged in a variety of professional learning opportunities. Most of these have been collaborative efforts to learn new strategies about how best to teach children. Pedagogy is an oft-mentioned topic of discussion during professional learning events such as the South Eastern Alberta

Teachers' Convention and collaboration is often used in session descriptions as a main method of instructional delivery. Further, the TQS (Government of Alberta, 2018b) requires that teachers engage in "career long learning" (p. 4). Consequently, I often create goals centered on engaging in collaboration with other teachers "to build personal and collective professional capacities and expertise" (Government of Alberta, 2018b, p. 4) while also seeking out and "critically reviewing and applying educational research to improve practice" (p. 4).

Throughout my six-year career I have worked in the same kindergarten to grade six elementary school. The school has a small student population of approximately 160 students with only one class of each grade level. Due to our small population, there have at times been multi-level classrooms in which a teacher might be covering both the first and second grade curriculum, but most of the time the school consists of single classes per grade. This means that there is a small working staff of seven or eight teachers with whom I can collaborate regarding classroom teaching, professional learning, and pedagogy. While professional learning creates opportunities for collaboration in my school, I often feel the learning is limited by the small number of staff members. If a professional development opportunity comes along that many staff members feel has the potential to be valuable, it can be difficult for all who are interested to attend as it would mean the school would be filled with substitute teachers. This can logistically be problematic and has, at times, hampered teachers' ability to undertake professional learning. To combat this difficulty, our school leadership team sends spokespeople to represent grades one, two, and three, and grades four, five, and six. The principal

facilitates dissemination of this learning by creating time during staff meetings for teachers to speak to and teach about new professional learning.

I have been able to work with other teachers in differing capacities but find that I am limited in my collaboration and professional learning about teaching in my own grade since there are no other same grade teachers to collaborate with. Therefore, when the offer was extended, I eagerly accepted an invitation to work with another teacher of the same grade from a different school. This was a unique situation in which I would be able to collaborate with a teacher who was covering the same curriculum as I was – something I had not done since entering the profession. This was not an act mandated by my principal or central office, but an opportunity I pursued. Having only worked in one school since starting teaching, I was looking for connections with teachers in other schools within the division.

Academic Context

In seeking out more collaborative professional learning, I turned to a Master of Education (M.Ed) program. This program utilized an Educational Leadership Internship to facilitate opportunities for aspiring leaders to attempt new learning in a practical and realistic manner. Over the course of two internships, I worked within my school to develop a shared language regarding literacy instruction and worked to foster collaboration between staff members. Both internships shared a common thread of collaborative professional learning. During my first internship, successful practices in literacy instruction were uncovered, shared, learned, and then implemented into teaching across the school's grades. The second internship focused on fostering collaboration between teachers through the use of *Generative Dialogue* (Adams et al., 2019).

While the M.Ed program made use of these internships to put essential learnings into practice, the rest of the learning was covered through a combination of face-to-face and online learning. As the program is designed with full time educators in mind, on-campus delivery is not entirely feasible during the school year and therefore online learning is a main instrument for content delivery. While the cohort of students was small – around sixteen individuals – and widely-spread across the province, the professors worked to ensure that we still found ways to meaningfully collaborate. We would have loved to have remained in person for the entirety of the program but could only be together for three weeks each summer over the two-year program. Our professors blended recordings of lectures, virtual meetings, partner and group work, and a variety of literature resources to craft a program that, although distant, allowed for collaborative learning. Zoom meetings were used to foster class discussions and Moodle gave us a portal for exploring links and resources the professors curated for classes as well as a place to post our own thoughts and explore others'. We were encouraged and expected to discuss the topics studied, regardless of whether we were currently learning virtually or in person.

Comparable to my school context, the M.Ed program student population was small, and our overall group separated when in-person learning was completed for the summer. Although we recognized the difficulties in being apart for so much of the program, we were able to connect via social media along with our online student work and developed strong friendships and peer support. Despite our cohort size, geographical differences, and the unavoidable lack of in-person learning our professors were able to facilitate meaningful collaborative learning.

These M.Ed class based discussions were guided by the tool of generative dialogue (Adams et al., 2019). This tool had been developed by professors within the M.Ed program. It was designed to unearth the answer within the room; using the expertise of all present to develop efficacy and problem solve together (Adams et al., 2019). While generative dialogue can be used within a school to develop shared responsibility for student learning, it was employed within the program to develop accountability within us, as students, for our own learning. Generative dialogue was used, in conjunction with our course materials, to help us reflect in three ways: "for practice, in practice, and on practice" (Adams et al., 2019, p. 14). This reflection, while deeply personal, presented an opportunity to examine our professional learning collectively.

School Division Context

The school division in which I teach has an overarching goal centered on the idea of cultivating Optimal Learning Environments (OLE). This goal is a framework centered on student learning that aims to create a common language across the division (Medicine Hat Public School Division). Housed within the OLE is the "identification of specific elements" (Medicine Hat Public School Division, p. 15) that the central leadership team hopes teachers will use as an "aspirational model whereby…we collectively engage in processes of reflection, inquiry, collaboration, and connection to develop each element in our classrooms and focus on student learning" (Medicine Hat Public School Division, p. 15).

Employed across the division is the Collaborative Response Model (CRM) (Hewson et al., 2015), which is used to facilitate teacher collaborative work leading toward the goal of fostering OLEs. The central leadership team purchased a copy of the

Hewson, Hewson, and Parson's (2015) book for every teacher. The authors of this book maintain that "the entire school teaches the student" and encourage teachers to "abandon the practice of pleasant collegiality in schools so we might truly engage in collaborative, challenging conversations" (Hewson et al., 2015, p. 3). As this version of collaborative conversation is particularly focused on student need, in my experience, I find that when our division meets to undertake collaborative professional learning it can be difficult to have these types of conversations with anyone other than my immediate coworkers, despite the intent for collaboration to occur both within and beyond in-school connections.

The CRM employs Collaborative Team Meetings (CTM) (Hewson et al., 2015). These are weekly scheduled meetings during which different teams meet to discuss the progress of highlighted students. The model includes a pyramid of interventions containing four tiers: tier one is classroom instruction, tier two is classroom support, tier three is school supports, and tier four is specialized supports. The entire school student population is accounted for on this pyramid and a visual is provided through our PowerSchool Dossier software. We use this program to record meeting minutes, log actions for our next meetings, schedule follow-ups on actions for accountability, and to assess students' movement up or down tiers. Our meetings occur in grade groups, most often two consecutive grades at a time – grade one and two, grade three and four, and grade five and six. We do allot times for whole school meetings as well, usually two to three times a year, centered on critical testing periods.

When we meet in our smaller, two grade groups, we discuss the progress of specific students. These discussions center around what supports are in place for the

students, whether they are working, and what further supports are needed or can be removed. Consistently present during these meetings are the principal, vice principal, classroom support teacher (CST), and classroom teachers. As needs vary, educational assistants and external service providers may be present: speech language pathologists, clinical psychologists, or physical and occupational therapists. Our CTM provides dedicated time to discuss all aspects of a child and their learning, and the presence of many stakeholders in the child's education provides multiple perspectives on how best to support the child.

We can meet as frequently as once a week because of our principal's efforts to consistently factor it into our school's timetable. The meetings are structured so that teachers attend during the school day while their classes are supervised by a partner teacher. Teachers are able to then implement planned collaborative learning activities for their combined classes while the partner teachers is in the CTM. In addition to our CTM schedule, my principal has cultivated valuable collaborative planning time – two hours each week – into our set school schedule. During this time, teachers meet to plan, track progress, study data from assessments, and organize future assessments. This is a practice encouraged by the division but fully implemented by school administration.

My Curiosity

Upon reflection on my school, university course work, and school division professional learning, I began to wonder what more I could learn about collaborative professional learning and its impact on teaching practice, specifically in schools with small teacher populations or single-graded schools. While I have enjoyed experiencing the benefits of collaborative professional learning in a small school, I have also

experienced the disadvantages. Through these mixed experiences, I was driven to wondering what could potentially be done to increase or guarantee the types of circumstances that lead to high quality collaborative professional learning. I also became curious about what other teachers thought about their experiences; did they share the same opinions about the value and effectiveness of different experiences; did they feel that experiences could be altered in a way that would lend themselves to greater success; how did they feel about the leadership they were experiencing; and, if they felt that leadership could be guided towards aiming at more impactful collaborative professional learning experiences. It is a familiar scenario to hear from colleagues about the disparity between what is expected of teachers and what professional learning is available. Professional learning opportunities are plentiful, but they do not usually consider the point of the view of the teacher as learner – they may also not be pragmatically collaborative (Petrie & McGee, 2012; Rodman, 2018; Stewart, 2014). Hearing complaints of colleagues regarding the quality and quantity of collaborative professional learning available to them caused me to wonder about their perceptions of effective collaborative professional learning. What qualities or characteristics would my colleagues in small single-graded schools deem valuable to them during their professional learning time? What could school leaders do to ensure that my colleagues and I were partaking in impactful collaborative professional learning? What could school leaders do to mitigate the challenges of collaborative professional learning in small or single-graded schools? I wanted to understand what is involved in collaboration, its advantages and disadvantages, and the impact on teaching practice in small schools. The literature identified reasons why collaborative professional learning should be used as well as recommendations for

how to implement it and I became curious about the perceptions of teachers regarding these recommendations (Adams, 2017; Adams et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Hewson et al., 2015; Jenkins, 2011; Lockwood, 2018; Schnellert & Butler, 2014). I wanted to understand the different ways that teachers who do not have a same-grade teaching partner(s) learn together collaboratively to enhance their teaching and their students' learning.

This led me to my research question: What are the perceptions of teachers in small or single-graded schools of the ways in which leaders can effectively promote and support collaborative professional learning? I chose the specificity of small or single-graded schools, as my curiosity stems from my professional, academic, and school division experiences. I understand leaders to be principals or vice-principals, those most directly leading teachers within a school in a supervisory capacity. While I understand that principals and vice-principals are guided by the division and its superintendents, I am choosing to focus on in-school leaders and how they can directly affect teachers within their site. This choice is based on my curiosity particular to small or single-graded schools and how a leader can affect collaborative professional learning from within the building. The terms promote and support encompass two distinct areas: the former includes the efforts of leaders to seek out, critically review, and share collaborative professional learning opportunities with teachers; the latter focuses on a leader's efforts to understand teacher's goals, objectives, and the collaborative professional learning in which they engage. This support could entail reflective conversations – generative dialogue - around the collaborative professional learning, finding and allocating resources

like money or time for teachers to engage with materials, and allowing opportunities for teachers to share their new learning with other staff members.

The following chapter will examine the literature surrounding professional learning, collaboration, collaborative professional learning in small and single-graded schools, and leadership strategies pertaining to promoting and supporting collaborative professional learning. In doing so, it will establish the scholarly foundation of the question “What are the perceptions of teachers in small or single-graded schools of the ways in which leaders can effectively promote and support collaborative professional learning among teachers?”

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Alberta Education requires teachers to continually strive to meet the TQS (Government of Alberta, 2018b). This document "provide[ed] a framework for the preparation, professional growth, supervision, and evaluation of all teachers" (p. 2) in Alberta. Housed within the TQS are six competencies that include "an interrelated set of knowledge, skills and attitudes…applied to a particular teaching context in order to support optimum student learning" (p. 3). Most notably for the purposes of this project, the second and third competencies relate to a teacher's learning and professional body of knowledge.

Competency two requires teachers to "engage in career-long learning" (p. 4). This competency includes indicators of success such as actively seeking feedback, seeking out and critically reviewing educational research, and working to maintain knowledge and awareness of new technologies (Government of Alberta, 2018b). Competency three necessitates that teachers demonstrate a "professional body of knowledge…to meet the learning needs of every student" (Government of Alberta, 2018b, p. 5). Success indicators of this competency include planning and creating learning activities, engaging students in learning via instructional strategies, and using assessment and evaluation practices on student learning (Government of Alberta, 2018b, p. 5).

Just as teachers are required to uphold a standard, so too are leaders guided by the Government of Alberta in the *Leadership Quality Standard* (LQS) (2018a). Competency Two: Modeling Commitment to Professional Learning is centered on a leader's actions to engage in "career-long professional learning and ongoing critical reflection to identify opportunities for improving leadership, teaching, and learning" (Government of Alberta,

2018a, p. 4). Competency Four of the LQS (Government of Alberta, 2018a) requires that a leader "nurtures and sustains a culture that supports evidence-informed teaching and learning" (p. 5). Leaders can work toward an evidence-informed culture by creating "meaningful, collaborative learning opportunities for teachers" (Government of Alberta, 2018a, p. 5) that allows for continuous evaluation of their teaching "on the basis of the effect it has on student achievement" (Elmore, 2002, p. 8).

Ultimately, these competencies share the goal of optimizing student learning. As stated by Wei et al. (2009) "efforts to improve student achievement can succeed only by building the capacity of teachers to improve their instructional practice" (p. 1). Therefore, "teacher professional learning…is one way to support the increasingly complex skills students need to learn in preparation for further education and work in the 21st century" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). It is clear by Alberta Education's standards that both undertaking and facilitating professional learning is considered a mandatory requirement of leaders. What is less clear, however, is how they define professional learning or how best to achieve it in small or single-graded schools.

Professional Learning

Learning Forward's study on educators' professional learning in Canada (Campbell et al., 2017) defined professional learning as "the wide range of approaches and activities that are involved in educators' continuing development" (p. 11). Similarly, Wei et al. (2009) "conceptualize[d] professional learning as a product of both externally-provided and job-embedded activities that increase[d] teachers' knowledge and change[d] their instructional practice in ways that support[ed] student learning" (p. 1). Fullan and Hargreaves (2016) claimed that professional learning was "something that is deliberately

structured and increasingly accepted because it can…more obviously be linked to measurable outcomes" (p. 3). The authors explained that in the profession of teaching, "these outcomes are often connected to teacher quality, performance, and impact" (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016, p. 3). Professional learning can encompass a variety of activities, including "professional reading, data teams, curriculum planning, collaborative inquiry, and so on" (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016, p. 3). Adams et al. (2019) outlined ten elements that "distinguish…professional learning" (p. 130). Those elements include: cyclical, exploratory, differentiated, responsibility-focused, collaborative, individualized, context dependent, site embedded, and shared. As learners spend time "pondering, deconstructing, reconstructing, and actualizing practices" (Adams et al., 2019, p. 130), they engaged in a cycle of professional learning. The authors stated that "in practice, professional learning has a core expectation that learning will be disseminated, discussed, and laid bare for examination" (Adams et al., 2019, p. 133).

How Leadership Affects Professional Learning

Alma Harris (2014) stated that "the whole point of professional learning is to bring about positive change in the classroom, to improve learning, [and] to have an impact on learners" (p. 106). This point can also be applied to educational leaders; their sole purpose in the education system is to see to the improvement of student learning. Indeed, Elmore (2000) claimed that school leadership is "the guidance and direction of instructional improvement" (p. 13) and if leaders were to expect others to learn, they must model "the values and behavior that represent collective goods" (p. 21). Additionally, Elmore (2000) highlighted the idea of reciprocal accountability and capacity; that is, the authority of the leader depended on the leader's capacity to "create

the opportunity" (p. 21) for the individual to learn how to accomplish it. In the words of Fullan and Hargreaves (2016), "professional learning and development are the essence of the idea and strategy of *professional capital* – that is, if you want a return, you have to make an investment" (p. 1, emphasis in original). Elmore (2000) and Fullan and Hargreaves (2016) agreed that leaders must give in order to receive – simply put, if leaders have expectations of teachers, they must make sure they are giving teachers opportunities to learn and master the skills necessary to meet said expectations. If there is an expectation from an educational leader that teachers demonstrate a pedagogical strategy or technique, leaders should use their supervisory capacity to reflect with teachers about their ability to achieve the strategy. If the teacher feels comfortable with their knowledge of the strategy or abilities, then a leader might move towards working with the teacher to enhance the practice further. Conversely, if the teachers report they are unfamiliar or lacking in confidence, the leader can take steps to introduce the strategy and begin building capacity.

Similarly, Viviane Robinson (2011) argued that the "most powerful way that school leaders can make a difference to the learning of their students is by promoting and participating in the professional learning and development of their teachers" (p. 104). Indeed, if teachers are the variable most influential in student success, the most effective way to impact student learning would be for leaders to develop and encourage teachers' effectiveness through professional learning. Leithwood and Seashore Louis (2012) found that "the effects of formal leaders are felt because…they create the conditions in which teachers are able to perform well in their classrooms" (p. 15) and that "leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning" (p. 3). Further,

Adams et al. (2019) stated that "effective leaders are active participants in professional growth, not just observers" (p. 68). By extension, effective educational leaders stay abreast of educational research and practices to best prepare and support the teachers they lead. Combined with the expectations of Alberta Education in the LQS (Government of Alberta, 2018a), it is evident that leaders are required to actively pursue professional growth in order to enhance teachers' professional growth and, subsequently, students' learning.

It is clear from the literature that leaders have a critical effect on professional learning – they are responsible for providing, directing, engaging, encouraging, and evaluating it to improve their teachers' learning and, accordingly, student learning (Adams et al., 2019; Elmore, 2000; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016; Harris, 2014; Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011). Student learning is the goal of schools and should, therefore, be the number one priority of leaders in schools. Therefore, leaders must be active in their pursuit of personal and teacher professional learning. In organizing a school's teachers and pointing them towards professional learning that is proven to be effective, a leader demonstrates their willingness to improve student learning.

High Quality Professional Learning

Engaging in high quality professional learning has the potential to positively influence teaching practice and student learning. Several characteristics have been identified that constitute high quality teacher learning. For example, Elmore (2002) determined that "effective professional development is connected to questions of content and pedagogy that educators are asking…about the consequences of their instructional practices on real students as well as in general questions about effective teaching

practice" (p. 7). He stated that valuable professional learning needs to be "in contact with the specific and the contextual" (Elmore, 2002, p. 7). Therefore, effective professional learning is directly related to the needs of the school's students in order to most directly impact their learning.

The *State of Educators' Professional Learning in Canada* (Campbell et al., 2017) reported on ten features of effective professional learning in three broad categories: quality content, learning design and implementation, and support and sustainability. Teacher learning under the first category is evidence-informed, subject-specific with a focus on student outcomes, and a balance of teacher voice and system coherence. The latter idea refers to the "balance between professional development linked to overall system goals and also professional learning for teachers' specific needs" (Campbell et al., 2017, p. 33). Within learning design and implementation are these features: active and variable learning, collaborative learning experiences, and job-embedded learning. Finally, supporting and sustaining teacher learning involves assuring that opportunities are ongoing in duration with equitable access to resources explicitly supported by leaders. Fullan and Quinn (2016) advocated for similar qualities in their description of four drivers for change; "capacity building, collaboration, pedagogy, and systemness [*sic*] (coordinated policies)" (p. 3). When describing these steps in action, Fullan and Quinn (2016) described capacity building as the way to secure accountability by developing self-responsibility. The authors believed that developing capacity within teachers would contribute to internal accountability, which, in turn, interacts with external accountability networks (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). This takes a school's accountability beyond test scores and requires "constantly improving and refining instructional practice (Fullan & Quinn,

2016, p. 110) to engage students more deeply in their learning. To Fullan and Quinn (2016), cultivating collaborative cultures is essential to developing both strong groups and individuals. Those strong individuals can then be counted on to work together to "focus their collective intelligence, talent, and commitment" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 47) on problem solving. When referencing pedagogy as a driver for change, Fullan and Quinn (2016) understood that teaching and learning share a vital relationship in which students and adults are engaged in deep learning in order to understand what students need to learn and how they can learn it. Lastly, systemness, or policy coherence, is the glue that brings together the drivers of change to improve learning in quantifiable measures (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). This driver is indicative of a leader's ability to focus direction by developing a "shared moral purpose and meaning as well as a pathway for attaining that purpose" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 17). These four drivers of change require consideration when planning collaborative professional learning and, as Fullan and Quinn (2016) stressed, they "must be addressed simultaneously and continually from day one" (p. 11).

Collaborative Professional Learning

As directed by the LQS (Government of Alberta, 2018a), leaders are required in competency four to lead a learning community by "nurtur[ing] and sustain[ing] a culture that supports evidence-informed teaching and learning" (p. 5). Two success indicators of this competency illustrate requirements for collaboration: "(c) developing a shared responsibility for the success of all students," and "(e) creating meaningful, collaborative learning opportunities for teachers and support staff" (Government of Alberta, 2018a, p. 5). The presence of these two indicators demonstrates the importance and, indeed,

requirement of leaders to nurture a collaborative professional learning community that has student learning at its core. As stated by Robinson (2011), "effective professional development is a collective…endeavor because the work of teaching all students to succeed is a collective endeavor" (p. 106).

This sentiment from Robinson (2011) is echoed by Parker Palmer (2017) in *The Courage to Teach*. Palmer (2017) identified two sources teachers can look to in order to grow in their practice –"the inner ground from which good teaching comes and…the community of fellow teachers from whom [they] can learn more about [them]selves and [their] craft" (p. 146). Robinson (2011) contended that the success of each teacher is dependent on what the previous year's teacher was able to achieve with their students and that, therefore, teaching is a collective responsibility. The sooner this information is shared, the sooner teachers can begin working more effectively with their students or choose pertinent professional learning opportunities to address students' needs. This understanding and shared language between a group of people working in the same environment is a core norm that must be established as a foundation for effective professional learning (Robinson, 2011; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Similarly, Harris (2014) argued that "purposeful collaboration is one way of ensuring that there is coherence and centrality of purpose within any change process" (p. 87). In this instance, the change process would be considered students' learning. Hattie (2012) suggested that teachers "being open to evidence of their impact on students, critiquing each other's impact in light of evidence of such impact, and forming professional judgements about how they then need to – and indeed can – influence learning of all students in their class" (p. 69). Without a shared understanding regarding teaching and

learning within the context of a specific school, teachers cannot forge together in collaborative professional learning to positively impact student learning.

Collaborative Professional Learning and Leadership

If the sole purpose of professional learning is to foster teacher growth that leads to improved student learning, it can be considered a critical agent of change. Fullan and Quinn (2016) identified four drivers for change; notably among them are capacity building and collaboration. Capacity building, according to Fullan and Quinn (2016), refers to "the skills, competencies, and knowledge that individuals and groups need in order to be effective at accomplishing the goals at hand" (p. 6). In addition to the pedagogical requirements related to teachers and learning, Fullan and Quinn (2016) advocated for the presence of "expert leadership for change" (p. 6). Leaders must understand the needs of their schools and work to bring together staff to attain specific and contextual goals. Elmore (2000) explained that "if the purpose of leadership is the improvement of teaching practice and performance, then the skills and knowledge that matter are those…focused on clear expectations for instruction" (p. 20).

Marzano et al. (2005) outlined 21 responsibilities of the school leader. Particular to this project are three: involvement in curriculum, instruction, and assessment; knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and providing professional development resources (pp. 42-43). These responsibilities are reflected directly within the LQS (Government of Alberta, 2018a) across multiple competencies: modeling commitment to professional learning, embodying visionary leadership, leading a learning community, providing instructional leadership, and managing school operations and resources. The first responsibility – involvement in curriculum, instruction, and

assessment – addresses "the extent to which the principal is directly involved in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment activities at the classroom level" (p. 53). The second – knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment – is concerned with "the extent to which the leader is aware of best practices" (p. 54) in the aforementioned areas. The responsibility of providing professional development resources pertains to the lengths leaders go to in providing the materials and professional development necessary for teachers to successfully teach (Marzano et al., 2005).

Advantages to Collaborative Professional Learning in Small Schools

Small or single-graded schools enjoy the benefits of close community ties, a family-style culture, and small student to teacher ratios (Haar, 2003; Jones, 2006). These qualities are beneficial to helping leaders achieve their LQS-mandated goals to develop a shared responsibility for the success of all students and to provide meaningful and collaborative learning opportunities for teachers (Government of Alberta, 2018a). Wasley et al. (2000) found that "due to the general nature of small schools, the physical proximity of classrooms, and the support and camaraderie of the faculty, teachers benefit and learn from their colleagues as resources" (p. 46). While teachers in small or single-graded schools may have fewer colleagues to collaborate with, the limitation of possible collaborative partners may benefit their relationships and abilities to focus or adjust instruction for students. As teachers learn more about both their students and their colleagues, they are able to more greatly affect their students' learning as they learn about their students not only from the students themselves, but from their colleagues' experiences in teaching those same students. Indeed, Wasley et al. (2000) found that

“teachers in small elementary…schools were better able to track students’ learning processes across grades” (p. 47).

When examining the literature regarding small learning communities, Cotton (2001) found that “teachers in small learning environments feel in a better position to make a real difference in students’ learning and general quality of life” (p. 15). In a small or single-graded school there are fewer students and less separation of teaching staff through departments or specialties. These qualities combine to allow teachers to “develop closer relationships with students and other staff, experience fewer discipline problems, and…adapt instruction to students’ individual needs” (Cotton, 2001, p. 15). In addition to adapting instruction, teachers in small or single-graded schools are “more able to influence the structure and direction of their school” (Wasley et al., 2000, p. 45). As the staff is smaller and often involves principals in teaching positions, teachers are more able to influence or “make administrative decisions about matters directly affecting students” (Wasley & Lear, 2001, p. 23). In greater involvement with administration and regular communication with colleagues, teachers are able to create consistency across subjects, classes, and grades. Wasley et al. (2000) found that “small school teachers were more likely to have well-defined learning expectations for all students, set high standards for academic performance, and organize the school day to maximize instructional time” (p. 49).

As teachers are involved in learning more about their students through collaboration with their colleagues, they become more invested in finding collaborative professional learning opportunities that will most positively affect their school (Wasley et al., 2000). Combined with greater involvement in administrative decision making and

consistent and high expectations for all students, teachers are helping their small schools to “develop concrete identities, supported by a substantial and enduring sense of community” (Wasley et al., 2000, p. 34). As the sense of community deepens, students, parents, and teachers develop stronger relationships. Naturally, “communication between parent and teacher is much more meaningful when both are well acquainted with the child” (Cotton, 2001, p. 14).

Barriers to Collaborative Professional Learning in Small Schools

There are many shortfalls to consider when examining collaborative professional learning in small and single-graded schools: geographic isolation, limited availability of professional development funds or resources, lack of substitute teachers, teachers being responsible for instruction of many grades, and distance from professional learning opportunities (Glover et al., 2016; Haar, 2003; Reading, 2010). Geographic isolation and the lack of substitute teachers in this context refers to logistical difficulties in travel time and substitute teachers being willing or able to sacrifice gas funds to teach at a school far from their home. Collaborative professional learning can be foiled by the distance between schools in a division as professional development time allotments may not accommodate for the time and money required for travel (Reading, 2010). This is usually more of a challenge in rural school divisions.

Another important consideration is the context of professional learning opportunities compared to the realities of small and single-graded schools; the professional learning needs of teachers in small schools can vary from teachers in larger schools (Wallace, 2014). The range of subjects available between a small or single-graded school and a larger school can be quite different. As more teachers are hired, more

specialties or subject-specific teachers can be brought on board. With different expertise, professional development must, too, be differentiated. However, if the majority of professional development is limited to course content offered in larger schools, small schools can struggle to find professional development that is relevant to their context. Wallace (2014) recommended professional development committees whose sole purpose is to consider both "academic and nonacademic data of…school population[s]" (p. 15) to help guide the creation and selection of professional development.

Teachers in small or single-graded schools can face the challenge of being responsible for pedagogy across multiple grades or content and curriculum (Howley & Howley, 2005). Low student populations may cause budgetary restrictions that may prevent teachers to be hired for all grades or subject areas. This leads to teachers covering all subjects for multiple grades or being responsible for teaching one subject to multiple grades. It can be difficult for one teacher to attend relevant professional development to cover all subject areas they are tasked with teaching. When considering opportunities like the South Eastern Alberta Teachers' Convention, professional development sessions are scheduled concurrently. This could mean that teachers are forced to miss out on certain subject matter simply due to time constraints.

Summary

Literature indicates that collaborative professional learning is an expectation for teachers and educational leaders. This chapter has explored the concept of collaborative professional learning overall as well as within the context of small or single-graded schools. Collaborative professional learning is a tool that can be implemented by teachers and educational leaders to directly impact student learning. There are advantages and

disadvantages to conducting collaborative professional learning in small or single-graded schools. Now that the advantages and disadvantages have been examined it is possible to begin questioning other teachers who have shared similar experiences in small or single-graded schools. Learning more about their perceptions and experiences will further illuminate or uncover evidence regarding the ways in which leaders can effectively promote and support collaborative professional learning among teachers.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Researchers rely on one of two main methodologies to investigate phenomena: qualitative and quantitative approaches. This chapter will look at the similarities, differences, advantages, and disadvantages of both research frameworks. An outline of the process of qualitative study methods will be presented, along with explanations for the data collection and participant selection processes. The interview questions that will be used will be presented with their order and purpose explained, along with their structure. Lastly, the method of data analysis will be explained.

When investigating phenomena, researchers must ensure the quality of their data (Mertler, 2017; Neuman & Robson, 2012). This can be done in different ways depending on the methodology being employed. With quantitative research, measures of reliability and validity are crucial. Reliability implies consistency; Neuman and Robson (2012) proposed that, "it suggests that the same thing is repeated or recurs under…identical or very similar conditions" (p. 109). Mertler (2017) compared reliability to multiple points of view after an incident; due to variations between the points of view, a person might lack confidence in what happened. To gain clarity, it is important for a uniform approach to interviewing people of a set group that were direct eyewitnesses. Similarly, in data, if a test is repeated under the same circumstances yet yields different results, the test may not be reliable (Mertler, 2017). The discrepancies between results could indicate changes to fundamental portions of the study. Validity is chiefly concerned with whether the data collected from a study measures what was intended to be measured (Mertler, 2017). It is necessary to consider whether the data reflects upon or directly answers what a study set out to ask or observe. Researchers must carefully consider whether the data they collect

will “enable [them] to accurately answer [their] research questions” (Mertler, 2017, p. 154).

In qualitative research, “researchers are essentially concerned with the trustworthiness…of the data” (Mertler, 2017, p. 140). Mertler (2017) defined this trustworthiness as the accuracy and believability of the data, which could be “established by examining the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of qualitative data” (p. 140). The credibility of the data requires that the multiple viewpoints of a variety of participants could consider the data believable. Researchers seek transferability by establishing and describing the specific context of the setting the data is discovered within. Keeping the specific context in mind, researchers are required to “account for the ever changing context…[and] describe the changes that occur in the setting and how these changes [affect]” the researcher’s approach to the study (Mertler, 2017, p. 141) in order to achieve dependability. Finally, the researchers must establish the “neutrality and objectivity of the data” (Mertler, 2017, p. 141). Taken altogether, these four measures will aid researchers in their aspirations to complete trustworthy research.

A Comparison of Quantitative and Qualitative Studies

Mertler (2017) stated that the primary difference between quantitative and qualitative research is illustrated by the data: “quantitative research methodologies require the collection and analysis of numerical data…[while] qualitative research methodologies necessitate the collection and analysis of narrative data” (p. 7). That is to say that quantitative data provide numerical responses while qualitative data are narrative and semantic in nature. Neuman and Robson (2012) explained the difference between the two study types with the intent behind their research; “quantitative

researchers tend to believe that social research should be as objective and as scientific as possible, while qualitative researchers are more concerned with understanding meaning and are skeptical that objectivity is truly possible" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 339). The desire of qualitative researchers to better understand the meaning behind social interactions leads them to remain open to the contexts and perceptions of those participating in research studies, while quantitative researchers seek to eliminate outstanding contextual information to narrow down explanations to as few variables as possible. Quantitative research involves analysis of numerical data while qualitative research engages with data in the form of words. Mertler (2017) further explained that quantitative data provide information that can be analyzed statistically and can offer useful information" (p. 105) while "qualitative data provide opportunities for individuals to express their own opinions and perspectives on the topic of interest" (p. 105). Neuman and Robson (2012) stated that quantitative researchers "move from abstract ideas to specific data-collection techniques to precise numerical information produced by the techniques" (p. 104) and that "the numerical information is an empirical representation of the abstract ideas" (p. 104).

In comparing quantitative to qualitative approaches, Neuman and Robson (2012) contended that data for qualitative researchers often takes the form of "written or spoken words, actions, sounds, symbols, physical objects, or visual images" (p. 104) which leads the researcher to develop "many flexible, ongoing processes to measure that leave the data in various shapes, sizes, and forms" (p. 104). The differences between the data collected by qualitative and quantitative studies can be differentiated in another way, as posited by Neuman and Robson (2012) in typifying qualitative results as "soft data" and

quantitative results as “hard data” (p. 79). Neuman and Robson (2012) explained that soft data exists as “impressions, words, sentences, photos, symbols, and so forth” while hard data exists “in the form of numbers” (p. 79).

When contrasting quantitative and qualitative methodologies, another divergence involves the style of reasoning: quantitative research utilizes deductive reasoning while qualitative research typically relies on inductive reasoning. According to Mertler (2017), the “goal of quantitative research is to describe or otherwise understand…phenomena” (p. 9) while the goal of qualitative research is less about forming theories and more about providing an overall description of “what is going on in the particular setting being studied” (p. 8). Similarly, Neuman and Robson (2012) outlined a difference in how qualitative and quantitative research creates links between data and concepts; quantitative researchers “contemplate and reflect on concepts before they gather any data [and then] construct measurement techniques that bridge concepts and data” (p. 104), while qualitative researchers also reflect on ideas before data collection, but “develop many, if not most, of their concepts during data collection [before] re-examin[ing] and reflect[ing] on the data and concepts simultaneously and interactively” (p. 104).

Further illuminating the differences between quantitative and qualitative research is the researchers’ approach to gathering samples; quantitative researchers’ “primary goal is to get a representative sample…such that the researcher can study the smaller group and produce accurate generalizations about the larger group” (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 129). Alternatively, qualitative researchers “focus less on a sample’s representativeness [and]…instead focus on how the sample or small collection of cases, units, or activities illuminates key features of social life” (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p.

129). Qualitative researchers look to their data to "clarify and deepen understanding…[to] enhance what the researchers learn about the processes of social life in a specific context" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 130). Therefore, qualitative researchers use nonprobability or nonrandom samples – a slow selection of cases with "the specific content of a case determining whether it is chosen" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 130).

An additional difference between qualitative and quantitative research can be found in the paths they typically follow; the sequence of things to be completed (Neuman & Robson, 2012). Generally, "quantitative researchers follow a more linear path than do qualitative researchers" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 80). Quantitative research typically follows a fixed sequence of steps while qualitative research is more repetitive and cyclical (Neuman & Robson, 2012). An illustrating example of these diverging sequences is the creation of the research question. Qualitative researchers "often begin with vague or unclear research questions and the topic emerges slowly during the study," (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 81) illustrating its' repetitive and cyclical nature. Alternatively, demonstrating the sequential style of quantitative studies, "quantitative researchers narrow a topic into a focused question as a discrete planning step before they finalize the study design" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 81).

A final but critical difference between quantitative and qualitative studies is in their general approach to social science. Two fundamental approaches are generally employed in quantitative and qualitative studies: positivism and interpretivism (Neuman & Robson, 2012). According to Neuman and Robson (2012) "the vast majority of positivist studies are quantitative" (p. 38) while "interpretive researchers tend to trust and

favour qualitative data" (p. 39). Positivism "assumes that social reality is made up of objective facts that value-free researchers can precisely measure and that the researchers can use statistics to test causal theories" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 37). Positivist researchers "advocate value-free science, seek precise quantitative measures, test causal theories with statistics, and believe in the importance of replicating studies" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 38). They also "put great value on the principle of replication, even if only a few studies are replicated" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 38). On the other hand, interpretive researchers seek empathetic understanding and believe that "the best test of good social knowledge is not replication, but whether the researcher can demonstrate that he or she really captured the inner world and personal perspective of the people studied" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 39). It is the belief of interpretive researchers that "human social life is qualitatively different from other things studied by science" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 38). A key feature of the interpretive approach is the principle that people rarely relate to "objective facts of reality directly; instead, they do so through the filter of…socially constructed beliefs and perceptions" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 39). Due to this filter of constantly shifting contexts and perceptions, interpretive researchers more often favour qualitative data (Neuman & Robson, 2012).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Quantitative and Qualitative Studies

According to Neuman and Robson (2012), quantitative studies have the following advantages: the ability to employ probability sampling, reduction of concepts into more objective items, and the likelihood of replication of results. The use of probability sampling allows a researcher to "determine the exact probability of a unit…being included in the sample" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 333). Probability sampling allows

a researcher to save time and money by sampling a smaller, randomized number of individuals with enough accuracy to represent much greater numbers of individuals (Neuman & Robson, 2012). It also allows the researcher to "confidently state that his or her findings are generalizable to the wider population" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 333). Along with probability sampling, quantitative researchers reduce the concepts they are studying into "measurable and quantifiable items" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 333) that work to make them as objective as possible. With this objectivity, researchers can "measure characteristics about their samples in a standardized manner" (p. 333) that will aid in establishing conclusions that are perceived to be more valid (Neuman & Robson, 2012). The replication of results is an advantage of quantitative studies that "lend themselves to checks of reliability and validity" (p. 333), allowing other researchers to successfully recreate the studies with different subjects and compare their results (Neuman & Robson, 2012).

While quantitative data has the advantages outlined above, there are accompanying disadvantages. Neuman and Robson (2012) pointed out that although probability sampling is useful in quantitative research, it is limited by the "fairly superficial information…obtained" (p. 334). This is due to the fact that the manner in which the data is collected does not always allow the researcher the certainty that sample members "understand the standardized questions in the way that was intended" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 334). Additionally, the concepts that quantitative studies "tend to quantify often do not reveal much information about the deeper meanings that individuals may attribute to social life" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 334). Even though participants may be asked a consistent series of questions about a particular topic, their answers won't

necessarily ensure that the researchers will learn "other crucial pieces of information that would allow [them]…to have a broader understanding of the social phenomena" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 334) under investigation. Therefore, Neuman and Robson (2012) posited that a major critique of quantitative approaches is that peoples' opinions can be forced to fit into specific criteria without greater context.

Neuman and Robson (2012) laid out one advantage at the heart of qualitative studies: "qualitative approaches give a voice to research participants in a way that is not possible in quantitative studies" (p. 339). Participants were given a voice and the opportunity to provide their own "answers and interpretation of their social worlds" (p. 339) without the constraints of specific categories like those found in quantitative studies (Neuman & Robson, 2012). A general criticism of qualitative study methods was their validity and reliability (Neuman & Robson, 2012). This criticism had, at its heart, the understanding that there lay a great different between quantitative and qualitative research and the approaches they favoured to social science (Neuman & Robson, 2012). As qualitative studies aligned closely with the interpretive approach it was often perceived to be lacking in the areas of subjectivity, replicability, freedom from researcher bias, and transparency (Neuman & Robson, 2012).

Introduction to Qualitative Studies

Mertler (2017) defined qualitative studies as "research methodologies that require the collection and analysis of narrative data" (p. 320). Narrative data refers to data collected in the form of words and can include observation notes, interview transcripts, journal entries, existing documents or records, or reflective practice (Mertler, 2017). Qualitative research begins with a researcher's curiosity or question about a particular

phenomenon. It is guided by the researcher's data, which can be collected through a variety of methods, as listed above. Qualitative studies follow a "nonlinear research path" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 80) that allows a researcher to both collect new data and gain further insights with each repetition or cycle of the study (Neuman & Robson, 2012). A nonlinear approach is "oriented toward constructing meaning" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 80) by "conducting detailed examinations of cases that arise in the natural flow of social life" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 80). From the collected data, the researcher looks for patterns in the data, generates one or more hypotheses, and eventually develops generalized conclusions or theories (Mertler, 2017). This characteristic of qualitative studies demonstrates its flexible nature as it allows the topic to emerge slowly as the researcher remains "open to unanticipated data and constantly re-evaluates the focus" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 81) throughout the study. The patterns emerge from coding or organizing data into different categories. This process is known as inductive reasoning and "moves from specific observations to broader generalizations and theories" (Trochim, 2002).

Following along the path of research so far, I found myself identifying with the qualitative process. I began with very broad interests in professional learning in the setting of small schools. The questions I had were the result of further examination of the phenomena I was most deeply curious about; collaborative professional learning in a small or single-graded school context. I sought to find out more about human perceptions. This has guided me to the understanding that qualitative research was the best method to find answers to my research question. As my research question made direct reference to the perceptions of teachers, it was most useful to me to allow

participants the opportunity to explain their experiences, perceptions, and contexts. With that understanding in mind, I was cognizant of the fact that I needed to provide guidance for my participants that helped them understand what I was seeking to better understand. Therefore, I carefully considered what questions I asked and how I could guide participants to provide more information on my subject matter. Simultaneously, I needed to be flexible to allow for unanticipated revelations that arose. Knowing this, interviewing participants seemed like the most logical step in this study, with the caveat that the interviews did not need to be rigid in their structure.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews (Mertler, 2017) were employed to gather data in seeking to research the phenomenon of collaborative professional learning in small or single-graded schools. This type of interview constituted several standard questions that allowed for flexibility and further probing of interviewee's responses. This offered the "option of following up a given response with alternative, optional questions that may or may not be used" (Mertler, 2017, p. 134). Specific to the primary research question, interviews were a useful way to gather data regarding teachers' experiences and reflections. According to Neuman and Robson (2012), qualitative interview experiences allow participants to "express themselves in the forms in which they normally speak, think, and organize reality" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 252). This allowed participants to engage in the interview in a natural manner and proceed to have a trusting, mutual sharing of experiences (Neuman & Robson, 2012). The interviews took place virtually, using Zoom. This allowed participants to select a comfortable and private location to participate in the interview. Only the audio of the interview was recorded and saved. As

the participants in this study were colleagues of mine, it was an excellent opportunity to engage with the established rapport to receive participants' most accurate perspectives and experiences. It is important to note, however, that a qualitative interview is not interchangeable with a conversation between friends. While they both contain friendly conversation, a qualitative interview has an "explicit purpose….to learn about the informant and the setting" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 253). In addition to that noted difference, qualitative interviews are generally more one sided with the interviewer asking a higher proportion of questions (Neuman & Robson, 2012).

Data Coding and Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed a multi-step thematic coding process began (Mertler, 2017; Neuman & Robson, 2012). This involved "organizing the raw data into conceptual categories and creat[ing] themes or concepts" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 316). According to Neuman and Robson (2012), coding is "two simultaneous activities: mechanical data reduction and analytical data categorization" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 316). By constructing general themes, the data was condensed into more manageable chunks (Neuman & Robson, 2012). These smaller parts allowed me to access elements of the data and sift through the information to create an order of understanding (Neuman & Robson, 2012). With a broader sense of understanding regarding the main general themes of the data, I was better equipped to analyze the data obtained through the interview process. In addition, links between the themes identified were developed and explored (Neuman & Robson, 2012).

I used the coding process and thematic analysis model posited by Neuman and Robson (2012). The three steps outlined by Neuman and Robson (2012) for coding and

forming concepts are: open coding, axial coding, and then selective coding, accompanied by analytical memo writing. Conceptualization of concepts happened simultaneously throughout the steps.

Open coding is "performed during a first pass through recently collected data" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 316). During this process I worked to identify ideas in the data and assigned initial codes. These developed as "critical terms, key events, or themes" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 316). This was a very flexible first foray into the collected data and I needed to remain open to new and developing themes as they emerged from the data. While there were many possible themes that emerged, I worked to identify the ones with the most evidence as they are "usually considered the strongest codes or themes" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 316). These themes or ideas were catalogued with highlighted notes and transferred to computer files. This organization was vital to the next step in the coding process – axial coding.

During axial coding, I moved from examining the actual data to working with an already organized set of preliminary codes and themes (Neuman & Robson, 2012). My job was to "review and examine" the initial code findings and create links between them (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 317). In addition to the links I discovered, it also become apparent that there were codes that "cluster together into larger…categories" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 317). It was also important that I begin to examine "causes and consequences, conditions and interactions" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 317) as these highlighted further categorization or clustering of smaller codes. I also found that during axial coding some codes were organized into sequences, greater general themes, or relationship to the research question (Neuman & Robson, 2012).

In selective coding, the major themes emerging from the data were identified and it became necessary to "scan the data and previous codes and [determine] a core category" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 320) that housed all remaining codes. This was accomplished through the creation of a larger and more general code as well as through the discovery of a relationship between an already established code or theme and the remaining uncategorized code.

Conceptualization occurred throughout the coding process as new concepts were formed, other concepts refined, and critical questions were asked of the data (Neuman & Robson, 2012). Neuman and Robson (2012) stated that "ideas and evidence are mutually interdependent" (p. 315) in qualitative data analysis. To aid in conceptualization, analytical memos were employed (Neuman & Robson, 2012). These were notes completed by the researcher that contained "a memo or discussion of thoughts and ideas about the coding process" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 322). These memos served to "forge a link between the concrete data or raw evidence and more abstract, theoretical thinking" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 322). This is where I kept track of my ideas and reflections concerning the data and the coding. Eventually, the memos "form[ed] the basis for analyzing data" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, pp. 322-323) in this research project.

Process of Selecting Participants

Participants for this research were working in small or single-graded schools or had worked in a small or single-graded school within the last academic year. This was to ensure relevance as well as fresh memories regarding their experiences with both leadership's actions regarding collaborative professional learning and collaborative professional learning experiences overall. It was also important for relevance of current

collaborative professional learning practices. Fellow teachers at my workplace were invited verbally to participate. I used the script that follows with each potential participant:

"Hello (potential participant), I wanted to speak with you about a study project I am completing to fulfill the requirements of my Master of Education program. The study is concerned with teachers' perceptions of strategies that leaders can take to effectively promote and support collaborative professional learning. I am focusing on the perceptions of teachers in small or single-graded schools and hoped to ask you, a teacher in a small or single-graded school, about participating in this study. I have a letter here that contains more information about the study, what would be required of you, and why I am interested in pursuing it. Reading it does not indicate your agreement to participate and your decision whether to participate will not affect our relationship in any way. Would you be willing to read through this letter of consent?"

I explained the purpose of the study and provided them with a recruitment letter that outlined the inclusion criteria, expected time commitment, and what participation entailed. A letter of consent was crafted that contained information regarding the interview process and its purpose. It clarified that although the interviews took place over Zoom, a virtual meeting platform, only the audio from the interviews was saved. Participants returned the letter of consent to me in person or by placing it in my workplace mailbox. Pseudonyms were provided for participants and reassurances given that their interview transcripts would not be presented in whole; rather, through the data coding and analysis process the transcripts were spliced and reorganized. Additionally, the letter of consent clarified that the research was conducted by a fellow teacher. It was

made clear that I was in no position of authority and that participants had the right to choose whether they participate. Participants had the option to withdraw at any time, in person or in writing. The letter of consent outlined that participants had 14 days after their interview to request that all or part of their data be removed.

Permission was granted first from the division superintendent, then the site administrators, and finally from the participants themselves. Appendix A is the informed consent form that I utilized.

Interview Guide

"An interview guide is a list of questions that the researcher wants to ensure are covered during the course of the interview" (Neuman & Robson, 2012). As the interviews I conducted were semi-structured (Mertler, 2017), I created an interview guide that housed the base questions of the interview with follow up questions available dependent on participants' answers. This guide maintained flexibility in that it did not need to be "followed chronologically but serves as a guide for the interviewer" (Neuman & Robson, 2012, p. 259) throughout the interview. For the organization of questions, I constructed interview trees that began with the main question and contained follow up questions to the interviewee's answers. I crafted 4 main questions in this style.

I transcribed the interviews before moving on to data coding. To do this, I replayed the interview recordings and typed out the interviews. I did not find it necessary to use a transcription service.

Interview Questions

The guiding question of this project is: What are the perceptions of teachers in small or single-graded schools of the ways in which leaders can effectively promote and

support collaborative professional learning? To gather as much information as possible about teachers' perceptions I intended to establish an understanding of both the interviewees and the literatures' descriptions of both professional learning and collaborative professional learning with the first two questions. Question One asked participants what the term professional learning meant to them and was followed with asking how that understanding differed from the term collaborative professional learning. Question Two stated that the literature defines collaborative professional learning as a shared language and understanding among teachers regarding both student learning and school context and finished by asking participants if they agreed with those qualities. Depending on the participant's answer, I chose to follow up with one of two possible lines of questioning: why they felt those qualities applied and what qualities they might add or change; or, if they disagreed, I asked them to explain why they disagreed and what qualities they might propose to define collaborative professional learning instead. My intent with the remaining two questions was to examine teachers' perceptions of leadership strategies impacting collaborative professional learning within the context of small or single-graded schools. Question Three asked teachers to share what they perceived as advantages and disadvantages to collaborative professional learning in small or single-graded schools with vignettes or stories. Participants were also given an opportunity through this question to share anything from their experiences with or thoughts about leadership and collaborative professional learning in a small or single-graded school. Finally, Question Four opened with information from the LQS about Competency Four: Leading a Learning Community, and asked participants to share

actions they'd seen leaders in small or single-graded schools take in trying to achieve this competency. Appendix B contains the interview trees for each question.

Summary

Using semi-structured interviews to interact with teachers from small or single-graded schools allowed for teachers' perceptions of leadership, collaborative professional learning, and any possible relationships between the two to emerge from their specific context. The importance of the particular context for this project – small or single-graded schools – highlighted the qualitative nature of the project. The expectation was that from the semi-structured interviews, I would gain insight into the perceptions of teachers and their experiences with leadership and collaborative professional learning within that context.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

I conducted seven interviews with teachers from small or single-graded schools. Following my semi-structured interview script, I was able to probe deeper into interviewee's experiences and perceptions of their times working in a small or single-graded school. The flexibility of the semi-structured interview also afforded me several opportunities to summarize or paraphrase information from interviewees to better understand their thoughts.

Open Coding

Transcribing the interviews allowed me to conduct a first pass through the interview and begin to gather the possible foundations of my open data coding. To begin with, I found that challenges, positives, desires for leadership, and current positive leadership strategies were obvious areas of exploration due to their high frequency perpetuated by my questions. These became my first set of codes during the open coding process. To clarify, any challenges or positives I highlighted were specific to collaborative professional learning in a small or single-graded school. I focused in on the context of the school setting with the knowledge that any challenges or positives not specific to the context would be related to something other than collaborative professional learning, and could be explored at a later stage in the data coding. My first pass of identifying desires for leadership was aimed at identifying what teachers were hoping for in their collaborative professional learning experiences in a small or single-graded school, and additionally, interviewees were able to identify instances of current successes of leadership's impact on their collaborative professional learning. As I

continued the coding process, I cultivated two additional codes; one for understandings of collaborative professional learning and one for understandings of professional learning.

Axial Coding

As I continued to examine the interview data, I found that axial coding began with realizing that the desires for leadership code could be broken apart into two categories: general desires for leadership and desires for change in leadership. This second code came about as interviewees made remarks about suggestions they had for leadership based on current or past practices that were perceived as less helpful or negative by the interviewees. Additionally, it became clear to me that the understandings of collaborative professional learning code required a division into three smaller codes: one of a neutral or definitive nature comprised of teachers' understandings of collaborative professional learning, one of teachers' positive associations with collaborative professional learning, and one for teachers' concerns with collaborative professional nature.

Selective Coding

During selective coding, I collected the remaining data that felt remarkable into a group and found that there naturally became three final codes to be teased out: importance of contextual awareness, mindset of collaborative professional learning, and past experiences in large or multi-graded schools. In summary, I created the following 12 codes: Teachers' Perceptions of Challenges to Collaborative Professional Learning; Teachers' Perceptions of Advantages to Collaborative Professional Learning; Current Leadership Strategies Perceived Positively by Teachers; Desires for Leadership; Desires for Changes in Leadership; Teachers' Understandings of Collaborative Professional Learning; Teachers' Positive Associations with Collaborative Professional Learning;

Teachers' Concerns with Collaborative Professional Learning; Teachers' Understandings of Professional Learning; Importance of Contextual Awareness in Collaborative Professional Learning; Mindset of Collaborative Professional Learning; and finally: Past Experiences in Large or Multi-Graded Schools.

Teachers' perceptions of challenges to collaborative professional learning.

Interviewees shared examples of difficulties they faced when attempting collaborative professional learning in a small or single-graded school. Three interviewees used the same language to describe not having another same-grade teacher to "bounce ideas off of" in reference to the size of their teacher population. It was also consistently pointed out that professional learning was never "solely on one curriculum or grade" which meant, in their perception, that their workload was heavy as they were responsible for "coming up with each item or each assignment or lesson" on their own.

Teachers' perceptions of advantages to collaborative professional learning.

The interviewees unanimously identified "shared ownership" as an advantage to their collaborative professional learning in small or single-graded schools. They spoke of "common language" between the grades allowing "informal conversations" to occur naturally throughout the day in staff rooms, hallways, or classrooms – which led to interviewees describing their school's population as "our kids." This corresponded with remarks other interviewees made about the ease with which they could address gaps in student learning; they explained that "you can touch base more and learn more about the students; things that worked for them or things that didn't." One interviewee remarked feeling like their "voice is heard a little bit more…because your opinion matters" when there is only one teacher per grade. Additionally, interviewees described ease of access to

administration as an advantage of collaborative professional learning in small or single-graded schools. One individual shared that their administration is able to drop in to their classroom "once or twice a week, if not daily."

Current leadership strategies perceived positively by teachers.

Multiple participants appreciated the use of CTMs and weekly meetings. One interviewee stated that it was helpful as it was "time…set aside that you can work with a colleague rather than doing it after hours" while another liked that "leadership at our school provided time within the school day to meet with other teachers…and plan or work." The same interviewee went on to say that it "helped because you're able to ask questions and branch out" when seeking assistance from other teachers in the school. Another interviewee appreciated that administration provided "a lot of time for us to work together" and also found that "admin really encourages us to stick together, work together, be together." These meetings, according to participants, also allowed leaders to provide "specific ways that you can hit the ground running" when it came to new pedagogical practices. This encouraged participants as they could see "leadership taking the time to not just talk the talk but walk the walk…and dive in with us." This made participants feel that what leadership was asking them to do was "worthwhile" and that there was an element of safety as leadership was "tak[ing] the risk with us." Interviewees also reported appreciating administration coming into their classrooms to deliver lessons or experiment with new practices.

Desires for leadership.

Participants shared their desire for leadership to have "the prerequisite background knowledge" and to model "the collaboration they expect." Modeling what

was expected of teachers was an oft-mentioned desire for leadership from the interviewees. One suggestion an interviewee offered was that "it could be nice to automatically pair up two small schools" for collaborative professional learning purposes. Another participant remarked a wish for leadership to demonstrate that they "trust that [teachers] are professionals, [they] know what [they're] doing" and to let teachers "go now and have some freedom to do that."

Desires for changes in leadership.

Participants overall described a desire for meaningfulness in their collaborative professional learning as well as freedom to choose, direct, or pursue what they would spend time on during collaborative professional learning. Remarks were made that collaborative professional learning could, at times, feel "forced" or like teachers were encouraged to "just do it…even if it's not really meaningful." Some participants wondered if their teams "meet too often" which led to feeling like they had to "come up with something to meet about" if their collaborative professional learning time happened in a timeline that didn't fit what teachers felt was useful. Interviewees also shared that they'd experienced feeling "micromanaged" or pressured to complete tasks despite feeling "not quite ready to do it" because their work or student learning wasn't ready yet. A participant advocated for a "basic outline" of the expectation from leaders and then the freedom to "find out what I need…research it…[and] implement it." The participant was seeking "more rope" from leadership and felt that leaders needed to let teachers work instead of trying to ensure success by being ever-present "in the classroom making sure they're [teachers] doing their job."

Teachers' understanding of collaborative professional learning.

Interviewees shared a general understanding of collaborative professional learning as "working together as a team…towards a goal as a school." Participants also understood collaborative professional learning to be "a little more guided but…overall seen as a way of benefitting students in general." It was also noted that collaborative professional learning was "leaning on those people who have a shared experience."

Teachers' positive associations with collaborative professional learning.

Multiple participants shared the same adage of having to be "on the same page" with each other as a school, and that collaborative professional learning was an effective way to achieve this. Interviewees also felt that collaborative professional learning was about taking the learning and seeing "how we can make it work for our school…putting it in the context of the classrooms and the kids that are in our school." It was also shared that commonality in language could be achieved through collaborative professional learning, which would benefit not only the teachers as they spoke to each other, but to the students of the school as well. Participants found that having a shared language regarding student expectations "resonated and…meant something to the kids – it had a common meaning behind it."

Teachers' concerns with collaborative professional learning.

Participants felt that collaborative professional learning could feel "forced" or "more streamlined to certain professional development whether I want it or not." They shared experiences where sometimes the learning "doesn't apply to what I'm really interested in at that moment or time" and that cooperation among groups could be tricky as not all groups are "collaborative or meaningful." Additionally, participants shared feeling reluctant to share if "the trust isn't there." Exposing their perceived pedagogical

weaknesses to others felt risky and caused participants to question whether or not they "want anyone to know [they] have no idea" about a practice or strategy. In some cases, participants shared that collaborative professional learning was completely ineffective as "nobody even talked to [them]."

Teachers' understandings of professional learning.

Participants consistently remarked that professional learning is an individual undertaking – they perceived it as "individual responsibility for your own practice." They also noted that it was a consideration of "the research and the pedagogical approach of what has worked in the past and what the new research says." It was also of note to the participants that it was about "keeping up to date with what works best" and that although something new might not be better, "at least be willing to try new things" in order to "reach best practice and an optimal learning environment."

Importance of contextual awareness in collaborative professional learning.

Throughout the interviews, participants all made mention of the importance of their schools' contexts to collaborative professional learning. The differences in students' abilities and backgrounds were noted to affect what teachers "were able to do in their one-hour period" compared to other schools and teachers they might collaborate with. This acknowledgment was particularly important for instances where collaborative professional learning required them to work with teachers from other buildings. One participant noted that it would be key to remember that teachers "teach the student, not the curriculum."

Mindset of collaborative professional learning.

Emphasized by participants throughout the interviews was the importance of an open mind to the process of collaborative professional learning. Participants made

mention of the necessity to keep an open mind as “things change” and it takes “convincing sometimes to try new things” and “push people out of their comfort zone.” One interviewee surmised that one role of teachers is “to be supportive of each other and to help each other be successful and grow.” Another participant also shared that the value of collaborative professional learning is that teachers can “do [their] own thing” but should also “want to make sure that [they’re] doing it the way [they] should be, too.”

Past experiences in large or multi-graded schools.

Some interviewees noted differences between their collaborative professional learning experiences in small or single-graded schools and large or multi-graded schools. These tended to be examples used to highlight advantages of small or single-graded school collaborative professional learning, and therefore highlighted disadvantages to collaborative professional learning in large or multi-graded schools. Interviewees remarked that it could be frustrating as they would “have to track down three or four different teachers to understand or talk about each of [their] students.” Similarly, participants also noted that in a “school with a thousand kids, administration might know [a student’s] name” but not background information about that student. Another barrier to collaborative professional learning that participants shared was that it could be difficult to know all of the teachers on staff, let alone “be aware of what some people are teaching…or who’s had your class in previous years.”

Summary

After conducting seven semi-structured interviews, transcribing them, and following the steps of thematic coding, I discovered 12 codes related to teachers’ perceptions of ways leaders can effectively promote and support collaborative professional learning in small or single-graded schools. The next chapter will begin to

examine the relationships between these codes as well as the relationships between these codes and the literature.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

In interviewing seven teachers from small or single-graded schools, I found many similarities between their experiences and the information cited in the literature. Their experiences and perceptions both confirmed and further expanded other advantages and disadvantages to collaborative professional learning in a small or single-graded school setting. In attempting to answer the question "what are the perceptions of teachers in small or singe-graded schools of the ways in which leaders can effectively promote and support collaborative professional learning among teachers" this chapter presents the themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview data and compares these findings to those outlined in the literature review.

Discussion

To begin, when examining what teachers in small or single-graded schools understood professional learning to be comprised of, what teachers reported were similar to the understandings of Campbell et al. (2017) and Fullan and Hargreaves (2016) in that their professional learning was a broad assortment of activities that were aimed at learning to be better at their job, being more effective in how to do their job, and continuing to update their pedagogical knowledge. Teachers understood professional learning to be a requirement of their job, as per the TQS (Government of Alberta, 2018b), but also reported feelings of personal initiative and responsibility in their pursuit of professional learning.

Additionally, teachers consistently reported a collective responsibility and ownership of students' learning as constituting the driving force behind their collaborative learning efforts. This sentiment echoes how Robinson (2011) described

professional learning as a collective responsibility as “the work of teaching all students to succeed is a collective endeavor” (p. 106). The teachers interviewed also reported the frequency with which they held both informal and formal conversations regarding student learning throughout the day, often happening during teachers’ free time at lunch or recesses. These conversations are the hallmark of what Robinson (2011) contended was necessary for the success of students – teachers being in communication with the previous year’s teacher in order to share information about a student’s learning needs, styles, and preferences. Participating teachers made consistent reference to the necessity of being on the same page as one another; without this shared language and understanding, their students’ needs would not be so well addressed, and student growth would not reach the same levels. These teachers were sharing their day-to-day examples of the openness Hattie (2012) recommended as vital to improving student’s progress; teachers remarked upon sharing their impact on students’ learning with each other as well as seeking out from others the best way to move student learning forward.

The interviews I conducted supported the claim of Wasley et al. (2000) that small schools, due to their size and general nature of support and camaraderie, had teachers who more readily viewed their colleagues as resources. Interviewees stated that due to the number of teachers who had already taught students or their family members, there was a shared ownership of students that lead to easier planning and collaborating regarding student learning. Teachers reported that it was easier to plan for their students when the person they were collaborating with already had a previous base knowledge of the student, their needs, their background, and strategies for supporting them in the classroom. This shared knowledge and understanding led to informal conversations being

readily utilized throughout the day to tailor teaching to student learning; this is something that would be occurring during the teachers' CTMs, but they also found it happened consistently throughout the day as well – it wasn't strictly limited to set meetings or agendas. Due to a shared knowledge of students' learning needs, staff meetings incorporated opportunities to brainstorm, or problem solve, about students as a whole staff. Furthermore, even if everyone on staff hadn't specifically taught a particular student, teachers reported that it was a common practice to have conversations with students from other classes in the hallways, building relationships outside of the home classroom. Additionally, teachers felt that it was easy to get everyone on the same page for a school focus or goal as well as for the language used and expectations for students. Teachers felt that there was consistency for students in how they would be expected to behave and approach learning throughout the day.

Hand in hand with the behavioural expectations for students was the curricular expectations; teachers reported the ease with which they worked with the teachers of the years prior to and after the level they were presently teaching. This vertical sharing model was supported by Wasley et al. (2000), who explained that teachers of small schools "were more likely to have well-defined learning expectations for all students" (p. 49). Teachers also remarked in their interviews that they had an easier time discussing groups of students as their school population allowed for smaller divisions of students – upper elementary and lower elementary. This perceived cohesion meant that more teachers were together more of the time, particularly when it came to staff meetings or CTMs. Once again, this togetherness is something that Cotton (2001) found lends itself well to the development of consistent expectations for curriculum, behaviour, and learning.

The teachers I interviewed relayed the same concern for the importance of school context in collaborative professional learning in small or single-graded schools as Wallace (2014) did. Teachers consistently referred to their particular schools' context throughout the interviews – they understood it to be a challenge to their collaborative professional learning as other teachers and their schools operate in different ways with different (and often much larger) student communities and teacher populations. This contrast in the reality of teaching meant, for some teachers, that meaningful collaborative professional learning was not always a reality. An additional concern was that teachers felt it was difficult to collaborate with teachers from other, larger schools because those teachers didn't necessarily need to seek outside help; they already had multiple colleagues to rely on. Simultaneously, teachers also reported that the size of their school staff meant that they did not have the same resource pool to pull from when it came time to collaborate for their professional learning. Fewer staff meant that there was a smaller variety of available experts in varying subject areas or teaching styles – some teachers reported feeling stuck with what they knew and that they were potentially missing opportunities to address a wider variety of learning styles. Overwhelmingly, teachers reported that they didn't have as many other teachers to bounce ideas off when it came to planning, creating assignments, sharing the load of tackling curriculum, and assessing students. Teachers reported difficulties in being able to focus solely on one grade level during collaborative professional learning in small or single-graded schools; collaborative teams often consisted of multiple grades due to small staff populations. Participants also remarked that they were unable to lighten their loads by sharing work tasks with other teachers of the same grade and, instead, felt responsible for every lesson, assignment,

project, or test. Interestingly, the teachers I interviewed also reported familiarity as a barrier to their collaborative professional learning. Teachers spoke of the ease with which their staff members got along. Due to this close nature, some teachers also reported that it wasn't always possible for teachers to get a fresh start with students if they were consistently hearing about the negative aspects of students from other teachers during their collaborative professional learning time.

Leadership strategies.

I gathered the most data from teachers speaking about current leadership strategies they valued in making their collaborative professional learning effective. Robinson (2011) stated that "the most powerful way that school leaders can make a difference to the learning of their students is by promoting and participating in the professional learning and development of their teachers" (p. 104) – a sentiment reflected in teachers' responses. Teachers cited instances of their leaders participating in their classroom planning and teaching alongside them, and how they valued this opportunity for leaders to experience the day-to-day demands of teaching. The value of this to teachers was twofold: not only were the leaders of the school keeping up to date with their classroom teaching experiences, but the leaders were actively engaging in the pedagogical practices that were being examined through the schools' professional learning. This collaboration between teachers and leaders was highly valued by the teachers, as it gave them assurance that leaders were supporting teachers and modeling what they were expecting teachers to accomplish. This example struck an immediate connection to Bennis (2008) and his assertion that "leaders give others the gift of going first" (p. 4). Teachers remarked that they were pleased to see the leaders diving into new

material, showing them that it was worth pursuing, and that if there were failures, they would work with teachers to address and improve instructional practices. This stick-with-it attitude is also something Bennis (2008) spoke of in regard to leaders putting themselves on the front lines and "tak[ing] responsibility for [their] failures" (p. 5). Teachers reported valuing their meetings with leaders that followed a process of asking what teachers wanted to focus on, what steps they would take, and how the leaders could help. This example directly aligns with the practice of generative dialogue (Adams et al., 2019) and the understanding that "effective leaders are active participants in professional growth" (p. 68). This reflection on practice went hand in hand with teachers further stating that they appreciated leaders listening to them and sharing their own thoughts about how best to wrestle with the expectations of the division within the context of the school.

Desired leadership practices.

Additional teachers' perceptions of effective leadership were composed of two ideas: leadership practices they would like to see and changes to leadership practices they had experienced. Beginning with desired leadership practices, teachers expressed a hope for things already explicitly stated as requirements of educational leaders in the LQS (Government of Alberta, 2018a). These included items such as leaders who held fundamental knowledge of pedagogy and practice, particularly any new professional learning they might require of their teachers; providing time and resources to work towards collaborative professional learning, and modeling what they hoped teachers would work to achieve. This goes hand in hand with what Bennis (2008) claimed great leaders do: inspire and lead by going first. Similarly, this aligns with the understanding

Elmore (2000) and Fullan and Hargreaves (2016) concluded: leaders must invest in their teachers by providing them with opportunities to learn new practices and hone their skills in order to improve their practice.

Desired changes to leadership practices.

It is worth noting that four interviewees did not remark upon desired changes in leadership. When it came to question four of the interview about leaders' actions to achieve Competency Four of the LQS (Government of Alberta, 2018a), these teachers only reported instances of leader actions that they perceived to have value. Considerations for why this happened could include the timing of the interviews; completing them in the fall meant that the teachers were fresh to a new school year and administration, and, perhaps, hadn't had as many experiences with their leaders' attempts to achieve Competency Four at that time. It is also possible that despite my best efforts, participants simply weren't comfortable sharing perceived negatives of their current leadership. However, three of the interviewees were able to provide suggestions for their ideas of desired changes to leadership practices they had experienced. Teachers who did share remarked upon feelings of being micromanaged if leaders didn't provide them with what they felt was enough freedom to complete their collaborative professional learning. This stemmed from experiences where expectations felt prescriptive – like a list of tasks to be completed – as well as leaders seeking to control situations in order to minimize any negative outcomes. Teachers also made opposing observations regarding leaders' vision – some sought input while others wanted their leaders to have a vision but not push it onto others. This was supported by other teachers explaining that collaborative professional learning could, at times, feel forced or less meaningful if it was heavily

guided and not founded in what teachers desired to pursue for their collaborative professional learning. Some teachers also remarked that they would prefer less collaborative professional learning overall.

Mindset for collaborative professional learning.

Of the remaining data, teachers remarked consistently on the importance of a shared understanding of the context of the school prior to and during collaborative professional learning. They perceived it as both an advantage and a barrier to their collaborative professional learning, depending on the teachers they were collaborating with; if they were teachers from the same school, it helped them to quickly come to an understanding of what a student's needs were and begin working to address them; if it was teachers from another school setting, it caused friction in the planning process as overall expectations of students' abilities varied greatly. In addition to the context of the school, teachers also remarked upon the need to have a positive and open mindset when engaging in collaborative professional learning. Interviewees shared instances of the necessity to help gently push people out of their comfort zones in order to expand or improve their practice.

Past experiences in large or multi-graded schools.

Finally, some of the interviewees were able to share their experiences from working in large or multi-graded schools. The experiences they chose to share further outlined their perceived advantages to collaborative professional learning in a small or single-graded school. They expressed feeling grateful for how familiar they were with their colleagues as it allowed them to collaborate on a regular basis, and share ownership of students' learning. They also shared an appreciation for the ability of leaders in small

or single-grade schools to cultivate a nuanced understanding of their staff and students. This understanding better enabled leaders to support teachers when dealing with academic, behavioral, or interpersonal needs. It also allowed leaders to make thoughtful pairings or suggested pairings for collaborative professional learning: leaders could partner people with different levels of expertise or knowledge.

Conclusion

In seeking to answer the question "What are the perceptions of teachers in small or single-graded schools of the ways in which leaders can effectively promote and support collaborative professional learning?" I interviewed seven teachers from small or single-graded schools and collected their perceptions and experiences. Teachers perceived strategies for leaders to employ in effectively promoting and supporting collaborative professional learning included engaging in professional learning alongside teachers; implementing newly learned pedagogical practices in the classroom alongside the teachers; allowing teachers freedom of choice in pursuing collaborative professional learning; providing time and resources to teachers to pursue collaborative professional learning; putting themselves on the forefront of trying new pedagogical practices and modeling them for teachers; and supporting teachers in their collaborative professional learning endeavors.

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APPENDIX A

University of Lethbridge

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of Study: Elementary Teacher's Perceptions of Leadership Strategies that Most Effectively Promote and Support Collaborative Professional Learning

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You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you take part, a member of the study team is available to explain the project and you are free to ask any questions about anything you do not understand. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study? You are being asked to participate in this study because you are currently employed or have been employed in the last academic year at a small or single-grade school.

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of teachers in small or single-grade schools of leadership strategies that promote and support collaborative professional learning.

What is the reason for doing the study?
Collaborative professional learning is part of the expectations set by the Teaching Quality Standard (TQS). The size of a school determines the number of colleagues available for collaboration. Smaller schools have fewer staff members available to collaborate. The goal of this study is to understand what strategies employed by educational leaders are perceived as effective by teachers in promoting and supporting collaborative professional learning in small or single-grade schools.

What will I be asked to do?
You are being invited to take part in one online interview about your experiences with collaborative professional learning in a small or single-grade school. The interview is estimated to take between 60-90 minutes, and you will answer questions about your experiences with collaborative professional learning in a small or single-grade school as well as your perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies used by leadership to promote and support collaborative professional learning.

The interviews will take place over Zoom, and you will be allowed to turn off your camera at any time. The audio of the conversation will be recorded and transcribed word-for-word by our research team.

What are the risks and discomforts?
You are unlikely to experience risks or discomforts by taking part in this study. You will be asked to relay information about your experiences with collaborative professional learning and could potentially have discomfort or negative emotions associated with those experiences. You are reminded that your participation is voluntary and that pseudonyms will be applied to your data. It is not possible to know all of the risks that may happen in a study, but we have taken all reasonable safeguards to minimize any known risks to you. While we will make every effort to protect your privacy and anonymity, due to the small sample size it is possible that people may perceive they know who provided the quote, based on information from the quote, even though personal identifiers will be removed.

What are the benefits to me?
While there may not be any direct benefit to you, results from this study may help us learn about collaborative professional learning in small or single-grade schools and may benefit others in the future.

Do I have to take part in the study?
Being in this study is your choice. Participation in this study will not affect your relationship with the PI in any way. The PI will be able to find enough participants for the study if you choose not to participate. If you decide to be in the study, you can change your mind and withdraw your data within two weeks from your interview date. After that point we cannot remove you from the study because your interview transcripts will be part of the data set. To withdraw from the study please contact Colleen Schauerte in person, by phone (403) 952-2734 or email colleen.schauerte@uleth.ca to express your desire to stop participating in the study.

Will I be paid to be in the research?
There is no payment to participate in this study.

Will my information be kept private?
During this study we will do everything we can to make sure that all information you provide is kept private. No information relating to this study that includes your name will be released outside of the researcher's office or published by the researchers unless you give us your express permission. Sometimes, by law, we may have to release your information with your name so we cannot guarantee absolute privacy. However, we will make every legal effort to make sure that your information is kept private. When your interview is transcribed, we will assign a pseudonym (fake name) to protect your identity. If you would like to choose your own fake-name, please say so in the interview. Your interview audio file will be downloaded from Zoom and encrypted along with your interview transcription. The encrypted data will be stored on a password protected laptop that is only accessible by the Principal Investigator.

The information from this study will be seen only by members of the research group. On occasion, this data will need to be checked for accuracy. For this reason, your data, including your name, may also be looked at by people from the Research Ethics Board or by the University of Alberta auditors.

What will happen to the information or data that I provide?
The information you provide with form part of Colleen Schauerte's Masters (M.Ed) project thesis at the University of Lethbridge.

While the data is being analyzed it will be stored on a password protected laptop that is only accessible by the Principal Investigator.

After the study is done, we will store your data for a minimum of 5 years. It will be securely stored on a password protected laptop that is only accessible by the Principal Investigator. Physical copies of transcriptions will be stored in a locked file cabinet only accessible by the Principal Investigator.

There is no intended future use for this data. The data will be held in an identifiable state, using pseudonyms. Once data analysis is complete, the Master List containing participants' identifiers and corresponding pseudonyms will be destroyed.

What if I have questions?
If you have any questions about the research now or later, please contact Colleen Schauerte at (403) 952-2734, Carmen Mombourquette at (403) 329-2018 or Pamela Adams at (403) 332-4070.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Alberta Research Ethics Office at reoffice@ualberta.ca and quote Ethics ID Pro00122786. This office is independent of the study investigators.

How do I indicate my agreement to be in this study?

By signing below, you understand:

- That you have read the above information and have had anything that you do not understand explained to you to your satisfaction.
- That you will be taking part in a research study.
- That you may freely leave the research study at any time.
- That you do not waive your legal rights by being in the study
- That the legal and professional obligations of the investigators and involved institutions are not changed by your taking part in this study.

Please return this consent form to Colleen Schauerte by mail, email, print, or scan.

SIGNATURE OF STUDY PARTICIPANT

_____ Pseudonym (if necessary) _____
Name of Participant

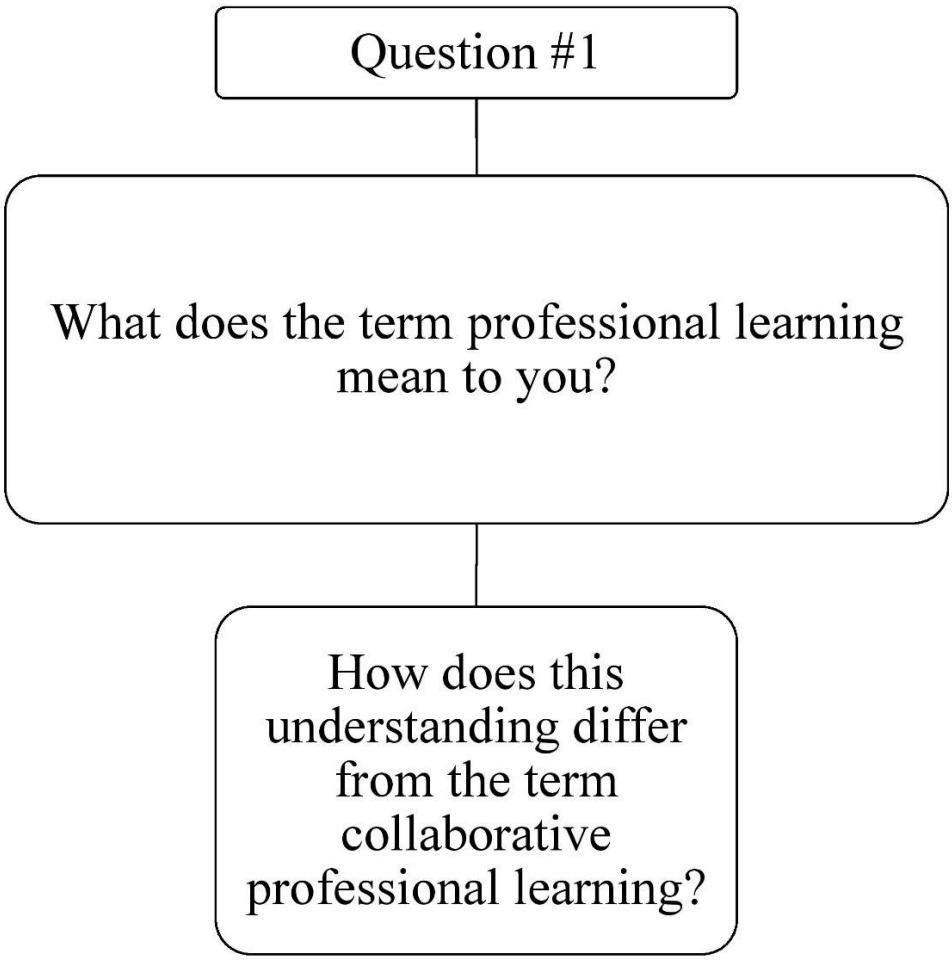
_____ _____
Signature of Participant Date

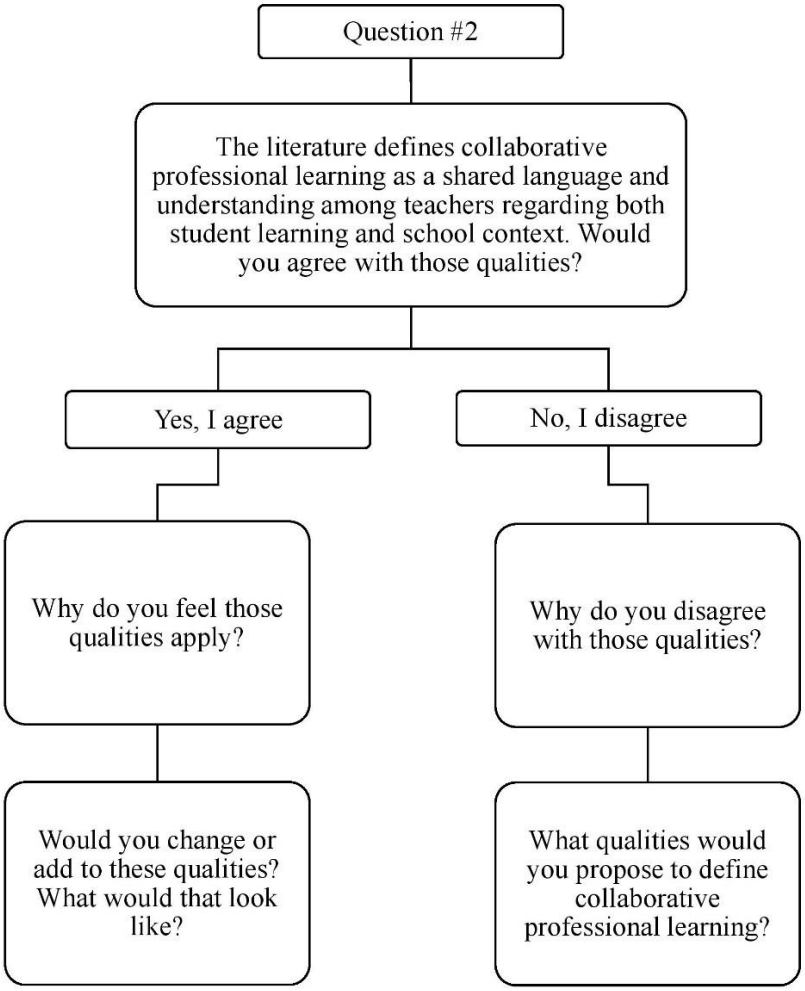
SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT

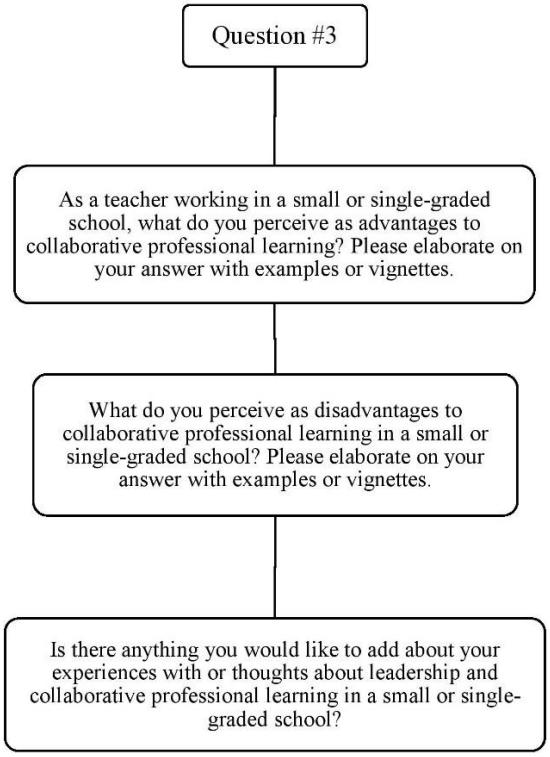
_____ _____
Name of Person Obtaining Consent Contact Number

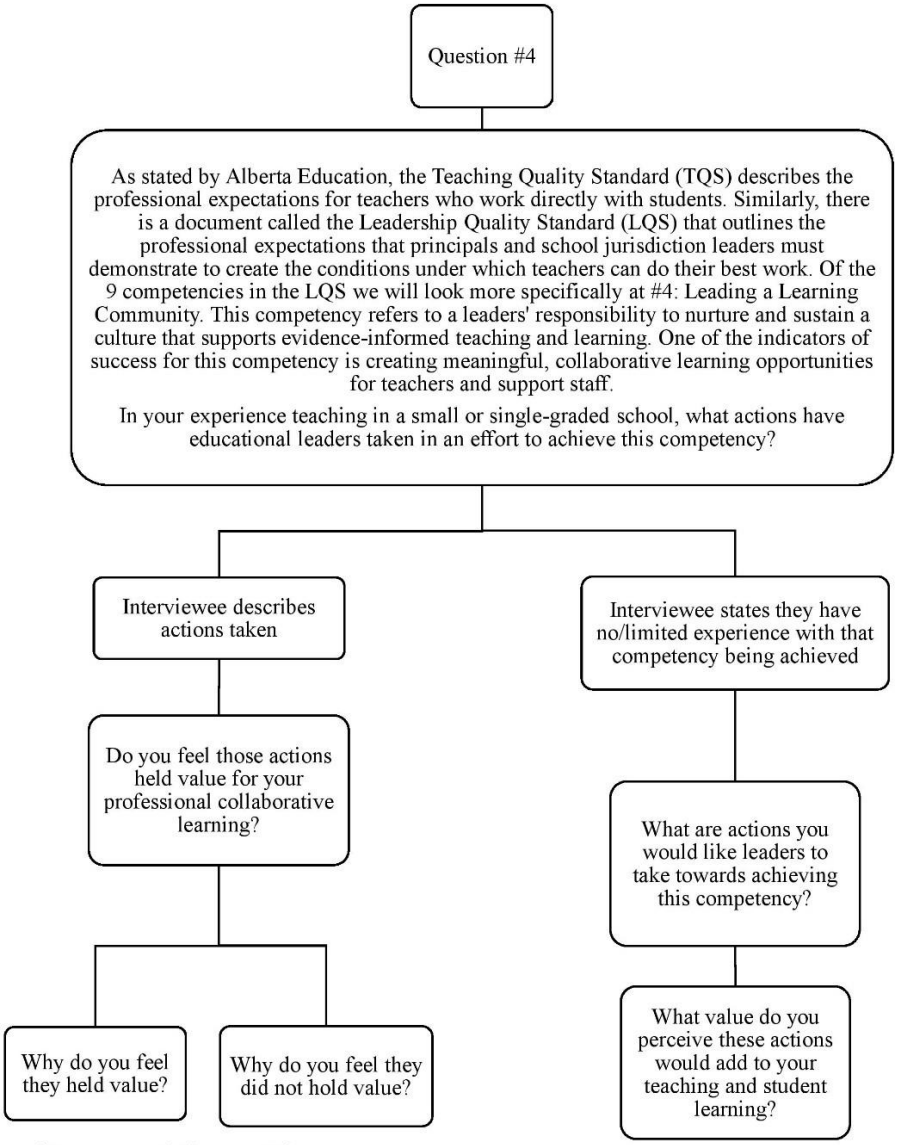
A copy of this information and consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

APPENDIX B


Question #1
What does the term professional learning mean to you?
How does this understanding differ from the term collaborative professional learning?


Question #2
The literature defines collaborative professional learning as a shared language and understanding among teachers regarding both student learning and school context. Would you agree with those qualities?
Yes, I agree
No, I disagree
Why do you feel those qualities apply?
Why do you disagree with those qualities?
Would you change or add to these qualities? What would that look like?
What qualities would you propose to define collaborative professional learning?


Question #3
As a teacher working in a small or single-graded school, what do you perceive as advantages to collaborative professional learning? Please elaborate on your answer with examples or vignettes.
What do you perceive as disadvantages to collaborative professional learning in a small or single-graded school? Please elaborate on your answer with examples or vignettes.
Is there anything you would like to add about your experiences with or thoughts about leadership and collaborative professional learning in a small or single-graded school?



(Government of Alberta, 2022)