SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE INSTRUCTION

WITH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

by

Elena V. Miller

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Approved: _____
Laura Eisenman, Ph.D.
Professor in charge of thesis on behalf of the Advisory Committee

Approved: _____
Deborah Bieler, Ph.D.
Committee member from the Department of Department Name

Approved: _____
Chrysanthi Leon, Ph.D.
Committee member from the Board of Senior Thesis Readers

Approved: _____
Michelle Provost-Craig, Ph.D.
Chair of the University Committee on Student and Faculty Honors

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

With increasing demands for inclusive education, general educators face the challenge of serving a widening spectrum of student learning needs. Prior literature indicated that teachers of inclusive classrooms benefitted from special education colleagues and professional development to learn instructional strategies. Other researchers have detailed how these resources create a reflective body of educators, or a professional learning community (PLC). By analyzing 41 teacher interviews conducted from a larger study, 6 teacher meeting observations, and 40 survey responses at Clearview (pseudonym), a public vocational- technical high school, this study described a PLC that supported general educators' needs with resources for inclusion. The analyses yielded a model to characterize practices in terms of capacities for sustaining a PLC that supported inclusive instruction. By understanding the structure and dynamics of Clearview's PLC, other inclusive schools could improve their support of general educators and their diverse students' academic needs.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Students in the Least Restrictive Environment

Since the passage of federal mandates to educate students with disabilities, American schools have made an array of attempts to include students with disabilities in the "least restrictive environment," (LRE) which for most is the general education classroom (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004). "Inclusion," "Inclusive education," and "inclusive classrooms" refer to school models that abide by the principle of LRE by integrating students with disabilities into a heterogeneous learning environment. According to the U.S. Department of Education, about 80% of students with disabilities spend at least 40% of the school day in a "regular" or an inclusive classroom. Nearly 60% of students with disabilities spend the majority of the school day in an inclusive learning environment (Aud & Hussar,et al, 2012). Previously, a large portion of these students were relegated to separate special education classrooms, or were taught as a group while integrated into non-special classroom, separated from their non-disabled peers. In brief, decades of research has reformed the approach to special education, recommending that the majority of students will benefit from being a member of an inclusive classroom.

Challenges for General Education Teachers

As schools more widely take responsibility for students' needs, today's students are "far more complex than were students in the past," (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000, p. 4). Although most pre-service teacher programs in the United States require coursework in special education, the amount of exposure to special education pedagogy and services in inconsistent due to different sets of standards. While some teacher preparation programs dually certify teachers in special education and general education, others require a single course in special education (Pugach, 2005). The variations between teacher preparation programs present the potential for in-service general education teachers to lack the amount of knowledge and skills to adapt instruction and provide accommodations for students with disabilities. These potential limitations present challenges for teachers of an inclusive classroom.

As a result of varied preparation requirements, pre-service and in-service teachers fluctuate in their confidence and self-efficacy of teaching students with disabilities in a traditional classroom. In a 1996 survey synthesis, Mastropieri and Scruggs found that fewer than a third of general education teachers believed they had sufficient expertise to effectively teach in an inclusive setting. In a more recent study, Berry (2011, p. 628) voiced the concerns of general education teachers as a result of "fundamental changes in expectations" and the need to "prepare (general education teachers) to teach students with disabilities." In Berry's exploratory study (2011), 61-82% of teachers reported negative satisfaction with their formal training in terms of preparation for teaching students with disabilities.

Teachers need knowledge about the disabilities their students have, skills to modify instruction, and an understanding of the process in determining students'

needs. First, one must be familiar with the types of behavior and challenges presented in the disability that the student has and how these affect performance in the classroom. Understanding how different learning and cognitive disabilities present themselves is essential to interpret students' behavior. Additionally, skills for adapting and modifying instruction for students with disabilities are essential for the teacher of an inclusive classroom. Without any background in individualization of instruction, teachers struggle to independently provide instruction for all of their students' needs. Finally, teachers must have a working knowledge of the formal interventions made to address their students' needs. (Lenz & Deshler, 2004).

Most students who are identified as needing additional academic support have an Individualized Education Program document, commonly called an IEP. Other students have a 504 Plan, which also provide accommodations for students with disabilities so that they may receive appropriate education. IEPs include information about the student's disability, educational needs, and goals. To create this legal document, an IEP team assembles and includes stakeholders like teachers, administrators, specialists, guidance counselors, parents, and secondary school-age students. Teachers' roles and responsibilities as a member of the IEP team must be explicitly relayed so that they are prepared to implement the procedures in their instruction (Deschler & Schumaker, 2006).

Support Models for Inclusion

Three models of inclusive supports are most often represented in the literature on secondary special education: *resource* room support from a special educator;

consultative-collaboration between a general educator and a behavioral or instructional specialist; and *co-teaching* by a general and special educator pair. In practice, there are wide variations in how these models are implemented in high schools, the instructional demands placed on teachers, and as a result, the actual benefits to students with and without disabilities. A long-standing concern with these models is the limited integration of instructional adaptations by general educators within and across classrooms (Huefner, 1988; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007; Sheridan, Welch, & Orme, 1996; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002).

In the *resource* model, the presumption is that the students' individual needs will be addressed by the special educator outside of the context of the general education classroom, requiring minimal to no change in general educators' instruction. Under the *collaborative-consultation* model, a general educator may acquire new skills for supporting diverse students in a classroom, but these may not be sustained in the absence of administrative or consultant oversight, nor extended to other students or classrooms. In the *co-teaching* model, special educators in content-dominated high school classes are often relegated to aide status, and general educators tend to rely on special educators to manage students with disabilities and implement instructional adaptations. Across the three models, infusion of specialized and often expensive resources into general education settings does not readily lead to improved instructional practices across teachers or diffusion of benefits to all learners.

An Alternative Inclusion Model

At Clearview (pseudonym for a Mid-Atlantic high school), a school-wide variation of the collaborative- consultation model was implemented to serve students

with disabilities in heterogeneous classrooms. Dr. Laura Eisenman (thesis director) designed and executed a study, from 2006 to 2011, to research Clearview's alternative to the typical support models in an inclusive school (Eisenman & Pleet, et. al, 2010). The study was a qualitative, interpretive exploration of multiple embedded units of analysis within a single-case (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Denzin, 2002; Yin, 2009). By studying the case over the first five years of the school's founding, the research team gained a deeper understanding of the key themes and core stories that developed through repeated, overlapping analyses across time, data sources, researchers, student and teacher cohorts, and discipline areas. The researchers explored the school's structure, policies, and culture resulting from its founding commitment to inclusion. The case study incorporated viewpoints from a variety of stakeholders, including general and special education teachers, students, administrators, and parents.

Clearview staff referred to their service model as "learning support" or "coaching." No resource room or separate classes were created for students with disabilities, except for a 12-minute homeroom period. During homeroom, students met as a group with a special education teacher called a Learning Support Coach (LSC) to check in and organize their day. Otherwise, students were spread across classes and received in-class assistance on an as-needed basis from an LSC who floated between classrooms for much of the day. Four LSCs were assigned one to each grade, with an additional LSC assigned to support 9th grade and two more working flexibly across upper grades and advanced courses. In classrooms, the LSCs worked with any student who appeared to be struggling regardless of whether they had a disability. The LSCs also worked frequently with individual general educators on specific accommodations or adaptations as needed or requested. No formal co-teaching arrangements existed.

When co-teaching occurred, it was temporary and stemmed from an instructional concern identified by the teachers.

In 2007, as a response to a school reform initiative within the state, the principal and teachers established a school-wide focus on improving literacy and created a set of three teacher-led workshops on specific instructional techniques. This program was called "LIFT," an acronym for "Literacy in Focus Team." All general and special education personnel (LSCs) were split into three cross-disciplinary groups. Each group rotated through three six-week workshops. The principal appointed pairs of teachers, who represented a range of experience and content areas, to lead weekly 30-minute workshop sessions. At the beginning of a workshop cycle, teacher leaders introduced new techniques. In subsequent sessions other teachers discussed how they applied the strategies in their classrooms and how the strategies benefited or could be improved for their students.

Modified versions of the workshops were repeated in the following years. In 2012, the instructional leadership purchased the "Learning Focused Strategies" program, which contains a variety of researched instructional techniques and formats. The weekly professional meetings were called "LiFtS," a combination of the prior "LIFT" and the Learning Focused Strategies (LFS) content. The instructional tools discussed and applied in these meetings included "Extended Thinking" strategies for students to engage in higher level processes and the use of Essential Questions for teachers to set learning objectives. The teachers also used the LFS framework to structure course units. Like the previous workshops, these meetings were facilitated by teachers and held once a week for 30 minutes before school. Unlike the other meetings, teachers were broken into content-specific groups.

The success of the initiatives to improve outcomes for students depended heavily on the general education teachers learning, adopting, and adapting new instructional techniques in collaboration with other teachers. Most of the teachers at the school, whether they were novices or veterans, had limited prior training and experience teaching such an academically diverse spectrum of students, including those with disabilities. Thus, the researchers were especially interested in how the general education teachers experienced and responded to the unfamiliar instructional demands and context.

Research Questions

As a future teacher, my own training at the University of Delaware is somewhat limited regarding the knowledge and skills needed to serve students with disabilities. Like typical secondary education teacher preparation programs, teacher candidates are required to complete one introductory course to special education called, "Teaching Exceptional Adolescents." Although the course imparted significant background information about types of disabilities, Individual Education Programs, and best practices in inclusive education, it was only an overview of the deep body of knowledge related to special education. The course used a number of case studies to illustrate the learning challenges of individual students, but was certainly not a complete representation of the types of students that today's inclusive schools strive to serve.

Because of my interests in inclusive instructional practices used by general educators, my thesis advisor suggested that I examine the experiences of the general

education teachers at Clearview.   After transcribing several teacher interviews, I noticed recurring themes of collaboration and instructional resources that general educators used to meet their students' diverse learning needs. Identifying these ideas as a focal point, my research was then guided by the following general questions:

- *How do in-service general education teachers **develop** the expertise necessary to teach in an inclusive school?*
- *What types of **resources or supports** are used by general educators in an inclusive school?*

Chapter 2

RELATED RESEARCH

Although serving students with disabilities in the public school system has been a legal measure since 1975, it is not until recent years that the conversation about providing many of these students with access to the general curriculum has taken place. The literature from the past two decades of research has argued for the resources that teachers and schools need to address this challenge. Researchers have found the most effective ways to teach students with disabilities in an inclusive classroom are through the use of different types of instructional interventions, or strategies that can be used to deliver content or practice a skill. For teachers to learn about the strategies in general, the research advocates for Professional Development, or professional learning, in the form of school-based teacher meetings or workshops. On a day to day basis, the research also suggests that having special education teachers as colleagues that general educators can consult with for specific student-related needs is a benefit to instruction. The interactions that teachers and school staff have that serve to meet students' needs form a proactive and reflective body of stakeholders that researchers refer widely to as a professional learning community (PLC). To drive and sustain these communities, the research implies that effective leadership from principals and other school administrators is crucial in providing the support and resources to general education teachers of inclusive classrooms.

Need for Resources

Since the implementation of inclusive practices in U.S. schools, many general education teachers have struggled to meet the demands of a widening spectrum of student needs. By compiling surveys across a nearly 40- year span, Mastropieri and Scruggs (1996) concluded that teachers need an intensive and ongoing plan for on-the-job training. In a 2011 single survey, nearly half of the participants independently cited continued training and professional development as an essential component for success in an inclusive classroom (Berry, 2011). Ongoing PD emphasizes the changing needs of students, schools, and society. Additionally, having constant resources within the school staff model is important for teachers to access information as they plan and teach content and respond to individual student needs.

Instructional Interventions

Proponents of inclusive education attribute its success to a strong focus on "educating students with disabilities in the context of educating all their students," (Brigharm, Cobb, Morrocco, Clay, & Zigmond, 2006). Instead of "dumbing down" the curriculum to reach students who are performing below grade level or have lower cognitive abilities, teachers are encouraged to make instruction accessible to a wide variety of learning needs. To accomplish this goal, teachers can learn to use a differentiated instruction approach to meet the needs of a diverse classroom without relying solely on a special educator to provide instruction to students with identified disabilities. Differentiation implies that "teachers will create different levels of expectations for task completion" for different students (Waldron & McLeskey, 2001).

This practice relies on the appropriate balance of challenge and comfortability with academic content and performance expectations.

Teachers can also use evidence-based instructional interventions that are meant to benefit all learners, with or without disabilities. Scruggs, et. al (2011) credit the general educator for rising to the challenge of "providing access to… the tremendous breadth of content for students with disabilities." Their study evaluated the effect sizes of various instructional interventions, such as graphic organizers, study aids, and classroom learning strategies (Scruggs, T.E., Mastropieri, M.A., & Berkeley, S., & Graetz, J., 2011).

Professional Collaboration

Rigelman and Ruben (2012) assert that learning opportunities for students will develop as a result of effective learning opportunities for teachers. Teacher meetings, typically called "professional development" (PD), are a significant vehicle to provide educators with information about instructional interventions, strategies, and differentiation practices. Traditionally, PD renders teachers as "passive participants" in lecture- style presentations given by administrators or education consultants brought into the school. In this format, teachers may not have the opportunities to share ideas or address concerns as they arise, leaving the experience without useful applications for their particular classroom (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

To counter the limitations of traditional PD, a call for teacher-led, collaborative learning has erupted in educational research. Collaboration requires people to work together, as colleagues with different experiences and expertise, to solve common

11

problems. Collaboration creates a supportive network that encourages the "optimism, creativity, and hope" needed to address the myriad of complex problems in schools. With "material and emotional support," stakeholders are much more suited and internally motivated to engage in the process of improvement (Conoley & Conoley, 2010, p. 77). Rather than simply receiving information from individuals removed from the specific school setting, teachers interact with their peers who are familiar with the particular students whose needs they strive to meet. They present follow-up reports and questions to each other and help their fellow teachers to evaluate their own instruction for improvement.

Waldron & McLeskey (2010) describe teacher collaboration as essential to larger scale school reform initiatives. The authors found that instructional improvement was initiated by school cultures that allowed professionals to express and share expertise to jointly solve problems they and their students face. "Extensive follow-up" is another key aspect in ensuring that the resulting problem solving is part of a responsive and dynamic environment, focused on improvement. To meet students' needs, these interactions must continue beyond the scope of set meeting times, and be embedded in the school culture's day- to- day activities (pg. 64). The sum of these behaviors yields an institutional framework that sets new norms, values, and attitudes for students, teachers, administration, and staff.

Professional Learning Communities

The combination of formal and informal teacher collaboration creates a system called a "Professional Learning Community." Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are comprised of teachers and school leaders who focus on improving

instruction by engaging in "reflective dialogue and de-privatized practice" with their peers (Rigelman & Rubin, 2012, p. 982). Because professionals work together to solve problems and meet common goals, the surrounding culture embraces inquiry. Snow-Gerano (2005) characterizes the creation of this type of community as one that requires "shift to uncertainty" so that questions may be posed and actions may be initiated to solve these identified problems (pg. 241). Trying out strategies to remedy instructional weaknesses is a process that requires constant reflection and adaption, with the eventual product of "collective growth" for teachers and their students (pg. 254).

Mitchell and Sackney (2000) describe learning communities as having capacities to develop in "personal," "interpersonal," and "organizational" contexts. The personal capacity reflects the attitudes that individuals have about the school's values and the decisions that they make to be a part of the school's initiatives. The interpersonal capacity respects the interactions that community members have that help to advance the school initiatives. The organizational capacity represents the policies made by leaders that help to set up the community values and initiatives. In a 2009 follow-up to their body of work on PLCs, Mitchell and Sackney further refined the building of capacities in a PLC as constructing "enduring relationships, principles, processes, agreements, and systems" (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009, pg. 5). Rather than only thinking about the outcomes of a Professional Learning Community, their work renewed its focus on *how* these outcomes can be achieved. Their work provides a roadmap for schools to engage in collaborative and reflective practices that help to drive initiatives such as effective inclusion.

Cochran-Smith & Demers (2009) characterize teachers as "adaptive experts" (p.360) who apply their pedagogical knowledge to different needs. Cochran-Smith & Demers (2009) also emphasize reflection as an integral part of learning communities. Teachers must respond to the outcomes of instructional decisions based on their application of knowledge (pg. 382), and these practices emphasize the "relationship between knowledge and practice" (p. 383). PLCs are thereby focused on the development of teachers by collectively engaging in the reflective process, and sharing reflections among a body of teachers, each with their own unique knowledge and experiences.

One type of collaborative activity teachers can engage with in a PLC is called a "lesson study" (Hurd & Licciardo-Musso, 2005.) The lesson study involves teachers bringing in student work samples to professional meetings for data-collecting, research-oriented purposes. By engaging in lesson studies, teachers participate in "instructional improvement focused on planning, observing, and revising 'research lessons'" (pg. 388). The collaborative activities require teachers to work together on common goals of revising instructional practices based on collective feedback from students and other teachers. In the 2005 study, the teachers unanimously agreed that this practice would help to achieve expectations for differentiated instruction, the principle for student-centered instruction that especially benefits students with diverse learning needs.

Collaboration in Inclusive Schools

Today's students, including students in inclusive settings, bring more challenges into schools than they used to and therefore, teachers' jobs have become more complex. PLCs "opens spaces for this kind of complexity… to be acknowledged and honored and for connections to be forged among the people who make up a particular educational community" (Pg. 4, Mitchell & Sackney). PLCs, which emphasize shared expertise, provide a forum for teachers that "supports use of effective and differentiated instruction, evidence-based curriculum, and appropriate grouping practices," necessary for successful inclusion (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & Mcculley 2012).

For teachers working with students with disabilities, effective professional relationships need to be a "partnership between peers" rather than strictly consultative relationships that "emulate models of consultations… from mental health, school psychology, and counseling" (Cook, L. & Friend, M., 2010, pg. 2). The former style of professional interaction aids in the advancement of "mutual goals; parity; shared responsibility for key decisions; shared accountability for outcomes; shared resources; and the development of trust, respect, and sense of community" (Cook, L. & Friend, M., 2010, pg. 3). This sense of community of "collectivism," according to Admiral and Lockhorst (2011), lends to teachers' self-confidence and "enthusiasm" for "experimenting with new pedagogical approaches in their classrooms," a crucial element to improve inclusive instruction.

School Leadership

To build PLCs, schools need effective leadership from administrators and teacher-leaders. School improvement and effectiveness requires an "articulated and clear vision" that stems from the upper levels of leadership and is distributed to teacher leaders (Schildkamp et al., 2012, pg. 128). Mustafa Abdul-Jabbar (2012) describes "distributed leadership" as a theory that focuses on "interpersonal exchanges as informed by schooling content/environment."

Waters further asserts that school leadership should incorporate the idea of "high reliability," meaning that leaders detect weaknesses in schools early and respond rapidly to find solutions. He further characterizes "High-Reliability Organizations" (HROs) as those that are reluctant to simplify, are committed to resilience, defer to experts, and provide extensive and effective staff development (Waters, 2009). Schools can act as HROs by cultivating teacher leaders who challenge the status quo, coordinate professional development, facilitate PLCs, forge community relationships, and are actively involved in school reform.

In order to support the challenges found in schools committed to including students with disabilities in the general curriculum, schools must set up collaborative communities to address not only the students' needs, but the teachers' needs. Recent research has cited the need for a network to support in-service teachers to provide them with ways to develop knowledge and skills, as well as consult with special education professionals to address individual issues. These Professional Learning Communities, as characterized by the literature, require leadership to develop and maintain the resources in these types of schools.

Chapter 3

METHODS

Design

The main findings of this study were extrapolated from a subset of the data collected in a qualitative longitudinal case study, with multiple embedded units of analysis (Yin, 2009) originally conducted by my thesis advisor and her colleagues. Clearview, a pseudonym for a vocational- technical high school, was the single site in which researchers observed the workings of an inclusive setting. My purpose was to understand the general educators' experience in a school dedicated to inclusion. I wanted to know what material resources and faculty support were available to general education teachers in order to teach students with disabilities. I was also interested in learning how in-service teachers developed the instructional expertise needed to teach in an inclusive school. By examining a single unit from the case study, I could gain individual perspectives and track common experiences. I used an interpretive research approach (Brantlinger et al, 2005) to develop a grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) that would describe the availability and use of resources by the teachers in my study. My aim was to organize this information into elements that could potentially be transferred to other schools that shared similar goals for inclusive education.

Context

Clearview was the newest of four vocational-technical high schools in its county-wide school district. It opened in 2005 and was a result of nearly a decade of planning. Academic and technical career-based courses were offered in its 255,000 square foot facility. In the final year of the original study (2011), Clearview had an 83-member instructional staff, 39% of which reported having Master's degrees and 15% of which identified themselves as minority. At full capacity, the school enrolled approximately 1040 students (grades 9-12) with 37% identifying as minority students, 25% low income, and 10% special education (including specific learning disabilities, physical disabilities, attention disorders, Asperger Syndrome, and mild intellectual disability). All of Clearview's students received instruction in heterogeneous-ability classrooms and workspaces, as the school subscribed to the policy of inclusion from the very beginning.

Data Sources

Primary data for my substudy were the 41 semi-structured interviews conducted across five years with 25 academic teachers (6 English, 7 mathematics, 6 science, 6 social studies). Of the 25 distinct general education teachers involved, 17 teachers were female and 8 were male. This subset was comprised of teachers who had a range of prior teaching experiences, from novice (17 teachers with 5 or fewer years of experience) to veteran (5 teachers with greater than 15 years of experience).

One teacher had nearly 25 years of experience as an educator, while several other teachers had recently started their teaching careers at Clearview or within the district. (The "years of experience" refers to the experience level at the time of each teacher's first interview in the study.)

The interviews were studied within the context of a complete data set for the five-year case study conducted by my thesis advisor, which included 243 semi-structured interviews with 92 individuals including: focus students who had disabilities ($n=16$) and their parents ($n=14$); special education teachers ($n=10$); academic and career general educators ($n=37$); and school and district administrators, including guidance counselors and a discipline staff member ($n=15$). The interview data were supplemented with six focus groups (3 with students without disabilities, 1 with guidance counselors, 2 with learning support team members); focus students' academic records; field notes on informal observations; and school documents (e.g., internal newsletters). The interviews involved a mixture of questions about their experiences, from informational questions (educational background, teaching background, current position and responsibilities at Clearview) to interpretive questions (collaboration with other staff, resources used for instruction, perceived successes and challenges) (Merriam, 1998). (Sample of teacher interview questions/ protocol in Appendix A.)

This substudy also incorporated an entirely new data set taken from observations and member-checking surveys. In the Fall semester of 2012, I observed 5 weekly teacher meetings at Clearview. Because the teachers met by discipline area, I observed one meeting each with math, science, social studies, English, and foreign languages. I made sure to visit all of the content areas since inclusion was a school-

wide effort and from the interviews, I concluded that the instructional resources were not limited to particular content areas. I also knew that due to the nature of each content area, teachers were likely to apply resources in ways that were unique to their disciplines. I took field notes as they related to collaborative practices (physical setup, teacher roles, and tasks performed), instructional strategies (topics & themes, specific strategies), and classroom applications (adaptability for students' and teachers' needs). The codes used to record observation were developed from my early understandings of the teachers' experiences gleaned from the interview transcripts.

  At the conclusion of the observations, in December 2012, an instructional coach distributed a brief survey that I authored. The survey asked the general education teachers to rate their experiences with collaboration, self-efficacy, adaptability, and responsiveness on a *Likert scale* of strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree. I developed the survey items to reflect preliminary themes that I had identified from analyzing interviews. Teachers also had the option to respond to a prompt for open-ended comments. A total of 40 teachers responded to the survey. My observation and survey protocols are included in Appendix B and Appendix C, respectively.

  Additionally, as needed to clarify or confirm information, I directed questions to the instructional coach and members of the original research team. I also reviewed interview transcripts from the larger study.

Teachers:	English	Science	Math	Social Studies	Total
Quantity	6	6	7	6	25
Gender	5 female 1 male	3 female 3 male	6 female 1 male	3 female 3 male	17 female 8 male
Years Teaching	5 with Fewer than 5 Years 1 with More than 15 Years	5 with Fewer than 5 years 1 with 5-15 years	2 with Fewer than 5 years 2 with 5-15 years 3 with More than 15 years	5 with Fewer than 5 years 1 with more than 15 years	17 with Fewer than 5 years 4 with 5-15 years 4 with more than 15 years
Number of interviews per teacher	1 with 4 interviews 2 with 2 interviews 3 with 1 interview	1 with 3 interviews 3 with 2 interviews 2 with 1 interview	3 with 2 interviews 4 with 1 interview	1 with 3 interviews 2 with 2 interviews 3 with 1 interview	41 interviews

Table 1   Teacher Interview Sources

Analyses

My research began as an intrinsic case study, (Stake, 1995) as learning more about this particular school prompted me to ask questions about the situation of inclusion as a whole. My questions about how general education teachers instructed inclusive classes were first geared towards the particular instructional strategies used to reach diverse students' needs. To understand the general educators' experiences in the high school, I extracted, transcribed, and reviewed their interviews by discipline

area. I used a combination of a priori concept coding from the literature (e.g., accommodations, collaboration) and open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to establish a working set of concepts, which I further refined and organized into categories as I moved through each set of interviews.

My study then became instrumental, as I narrowed my focus to two main parts of the general education teachers' experiences: professional development and collaboration with Learning Support Coaches (the special education teachers). I used axial coding practices (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to explore the connections between teacher experiences and to further describe their common experiences with regards to collaboration with LSCs and professional development. Cognizant of the teachers' diverse experiences, such as different content and grade levels, I searched for divergent patterns by these factors, but found similar themes throughout.

As themes emerged, I returned to the literature on inclusive practices and professional development to situate the case study teachers' experiences within previous research. I also met regularly with my thesis advisor to discuss findings from other analyses of the full case and examine the relationships among case elements. From these reflective briefings, I developed diagrams and concept maps to demonstrate general educators' interactions within the school context. I drew some basic images that traced common interactions between staff as well as cyclical practices found in professional development structures. I developed a grounded theory about collaboration used in the context of inclusive instruction, building broader conclusions about Clearview based on these repeatedly reported practices. As I returned to the teacher interviews, I searched for confirming and disconfirming

evidence and selected in vivo codes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to anchor descriptions of the general educators' experiences in their own words.

Later, I was prompted by my adviser to seek related literature focused on professional learning communities, which proved useful. My findings reflected many of the characteristics found in a PLC (as defined by several researchers), including reflective practices, staff collaboration, and initiatives for school reform. Returning to the case study data, I began searching for the mechanisms that drove the setup of the professional meetings and consultative relationships as well as the informal interactions that were widely reported throughout the interviews as resources for improving instruction. In the literature about PLCs, I found a research team that described school-based initiatives in terms of "capacities" (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). I found similarities between Mitchel and Sackney's categories and the codes I used to describe the types of collaboration at Clearview, so I further analyzed my data to characterize it in terms of the "Organizational," "Interpersonal," and "Intrapersonal Capacities" described in the literature. Because I had previously described the Clearview data as formal and informal interactions, I included these distinctions in my own developing model based on the Mitchell and Sackney capacities. As I revisited the data with this new framework in mind, I further refined my model of Clearview's PLC, further characterizing the interactions within and between each capacity.

Procedures to Enhance Trustworthiness

Because my study took into consideration the interviews, my observations, and surveys, my sources could be converged through the *triangulation* of the data. Using varied data sources reduces the likelihood of misinterpretations of the phenomenon present in the case study. My subset of data also benefitted from the "prolonged field

engagement" (Brantlinger, 2005, pg. 201) from the original study, which collected data over 5 years. Because I was able to access over 40 interviews, I had a large selection to pull out direct quotations to convey the teachers' experiences. This lent to a thick description that respected individuality of participants while I sought the common occurrences across the data.

The objectivity of my developing ideas was assisted by regular meetings with my thesis adviser, checking that my interpretation was accurate and concurred with what she had observed while conducting the in-person interviews herself from the start of the original study. According to Brantlinger et al (2005), collaborative work "involving multiple researchers" help to "ensure that analyses and interpretations are not idiosyncratic and/or biased" (pg. 201). Peer debriefing provides "critical feedback" on interpretations, as well (pg. 201). Finally, my methodology was strengthened through a "bracketing" approach, described by Denzin (2002) as the process involving a "researcher [that] confronts the subject matter, as much as possible, on its own terms" (pg. 356). Though I approached the data with an "informed" perspective, I interpreted the data as it was before relating it to other theories and ideas in the literature.

Chapter 4

FINDINGS

By providing resources for inclusion, Clearview's staff developed the qualities of a professional learning community (PLC). The teachers grew into a reflective community of practice, working together to constantly improve instruction for their students. The PLC was a complex system of formal and informal interactions that facilitated their commitment to educate a diverse body of learners. In Clearview's PLC, the practices in its formal capacities (organizational and interpersonal) encouraged attitudes and behaviors in its informal capacities (interpersonal and intrapersonal). The widespread internalization of cooperative habits, reflective practice, and instruction based on school-wide initiatives helped to create a school-wide culture of improvement. The teaching staff rallied around the idea of constant improvement to achieve the school's goals for inclusion. In turn, general education teachers were supported by a community of resources to better teach inclusive classes.

Clearview's founders wanted to "break the mold" by working with special educators and university researchers to envision a new approach to inclusion (Admin_D1_052407). With their professional guidance, the school's principal hired certified special education teachers to work with assigned groups of students with IEPs. The special education teachers, called Learning Support Coaches, played a consultative role to the general education teachers. In addition, several general and special education teachers were appointed by the principal to facilitate professional meetings to deliver instructional resources to their fellow teaching staff. Through this

formal structure, teachers had opportunities to consult and collaborate with professionals to adapt and apply, reflect and rework classroom strategies that could benefit all learners, especially students with disabilities.

Because the vast majority of the teachers believed that these practices improved their teaching potential, they widely collaborated with other teachers of their own volition to further reap benefits. Most of the general education teachers interviewed reported working together, within and across content and grade levels, to both plan and problem-solve for more effective instruction. They also claimed that this collaborative culture was helpful in meeting the challenges of their role as inclusive educators. Teachers chose to use the instructional strategies from the professional resources when they saw them being used across the school and could rely on their fellow teachers to help them apply, reflect, and adapt their usage. In turn, individual teachers' attitudes regarding collaboration and teaching inclusive classes informed their collaborative behaviors like co-planning and consulting.
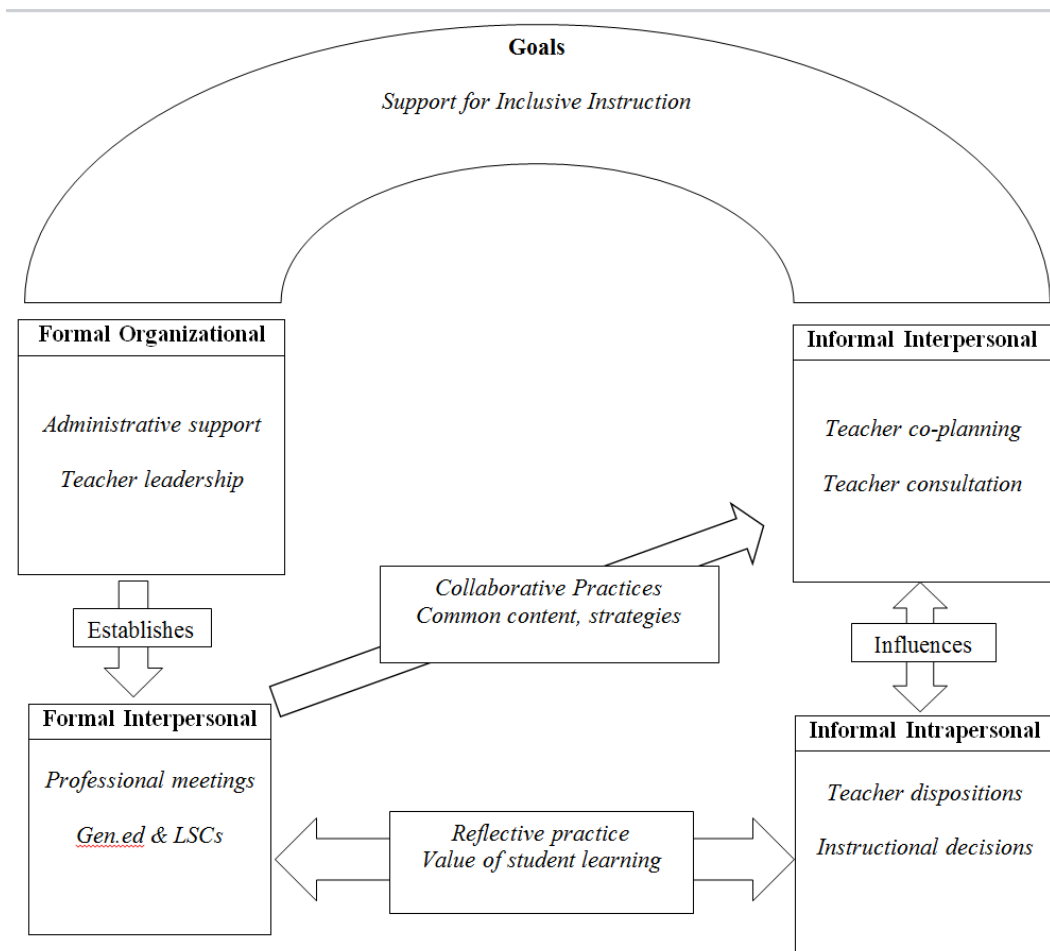
Figure 1   Clearview's PLC

Formal Organizational Capacity

Teachers reported that Clearview's professional learning community was in part initiated by administrative leaders who planned the school building, secured funding, consulted and hired professionals, and communicated expectations for the initiative of inclusion. The teachers interviewed highlighted their experiences communicating with the school's principal during the hiring process as well as the values communicated to teachers throughout their teaching experiences. Teachers also

cited the role of teacher-leaders that acted as liaisons to the teachers from the administrators. Overall, teachers reported that these leaders were helpful in supporting their professional learning needs.

<div align="center">Administrative Support</div>

The vast majority of the teachers interviewed from 2006 to 2011 attributed their success with inclusion to the support of the school's administration. The superintendent, school board, principal, and others established the underlying principles and goals for a new vocational-technical high school over a planning period of 10-12 years. When Clearview opened in 2006, the administration instituted clear expectations for inclusion and articulated the importance of collaboration to succeed in the complex endeavor. To encourage teacher collaboration, the school building's design included "teacher centers," or staff spaces with more meeting and resource spaces than traditional teachers' lounges. The superintendent and principal also recruited high-potential teaching staff, allocated funding for instructional resources, and scheduled professional meetings to further build a collaborative environment to approach inclusion.

To directly address the challenges of inclusion, the administration appointed an inclusion specialist as an in-house resource in the early years of the school. The university-based researcher and special education expert consulted with Clearview's administrators and the special education teacher hired in the first year to draw up specific plans to serve their students with extra learning needs. The specialist was also provided with an office so that she could easily observe and assess the school's situation and communicate directly with the Learning Support Coaches—in the first year, a single special educator and by the third year, a team of several special

educators. In the first school year as Clearview's consultant, the university expert served as a direct and intensive resource to the teachers by offering guidance for differentiation, learning strategies, and other instructional methods. Through the second and third year, she phased out her role as a consultant, and worked more with the LSCs as they joined the team. The administrators' choice to integrate this type of personnel emphasized the importance of consulting experts for problem-solving and establishing a new model.

The administration's commitment to supporting Clearview's general education teachers began during the hiring process and continued throughout the teachers' tenure. The superintendent reflected on the initial teacher recruitment, saying that they were focused on hiring teachers who were open to trying new things and working together with other teachers. He told prospective teachers, 'If you're going to work here, here's what you gotta do: you gotta live together, you gotta be able to work together, and you have to be open to that' (Admin_D1_052407). In a 2007 interview, the superintendent asserted that the success of an inclusive school depended on the degree to which teachers and other stakeholders collaborated and shared expertise. The superintendent encouraged hiring educators who already valued and practiced these habits.

One teacher, who had also been a department chair at the school she previously worked at, was appreciative of the principal's "forthright" and "honest" presentation of Clearview as inclusive during the hiring process. The veteran teacher said that Clearview's administration "… wanted them [the teachers] to know what they were getting into…." (Teacher_E1_052307). Another teacher interviewed in the first year of the school's establishment said that coming into a school with inclusion made her

29

"very nervous, very scared," since she had never been in this type of teaching situation before. This teacher said that she was assured that there would be help for all teachers from the special education teachers, Learning Support Coaches. The teacher said that as the school year unfolded, her fears subsided, as she "felt very supported and it was no longer a problem." (Teacher_M3_052907)

Others cited administrative support throughout their experiences at Clearview as early efforts to develop camaraderie between the teachers. One teacher spoke of staff meetings led by the principal, who would give teachers opportunities to praise their peers for their work. According to this teacher, the administrator also gave teachers the floor to share 'anything good that's happening in your life, your classroom, whatever.' The teachers found this practice a way to strengthen the relationships with their professional peers. Several of the teachers credited professional relationships for setting the stage for collaboration. Another teacher spoke of the principal's decision to pair novice teachers with the school's veteran teachers. The principal's goal was for the new cohort of teachers to learn from their more experienced peers, since there was "so much that they're going to learn" said one teacher, specifically regarding Clearview's practices for inclusion (Teacher_E2_110507).

This type of administrative support is not pervasive across all educational settings. One teacher compared her experience with the previous school she worked at. She said that when she "got into the role of being a teacher- leader" at the other school, "it became harder to deal with the administrative status quo." She further explained that other administrators tended to focus only on efforts to "fix what was broken." She much preferred the leadership of Clearview's administration, which

focused not only on problem- solving, but on aiming for "continuous improvement" (Teacher_E1_052307). Another teacher compared her previous experiences with school administrators as unwilling to communicate with teachers. At Clearview, "the administration is very open to hearing what you have to say" and brings concerns or ideas expressed by teacher to the school or district administration. (Teacher SS3_032008) These qualities were said to help set a precedent of open communication and collaboration that helped teachers access the information and resources they needed.

Another teacher summed up the administration's support: "They have your back as long as it's for the benefit of the students" (Teacher_SS2_060407). The superintendent, principal, and assistant principals not only set high priorities on collaboration but modeled the highly effective habits in their own responsibilities. As a result, teachers noted that their leaders consistently "emphasized… teamwork, teamwork, teamwork" (Teacher_S2_052907) and that they valued their leaders' commitment to creating professional learning opportunities. By building collaboration into the foundation of the building and staff, the school leaders defined Clearview's approach to how teachers would navigate the challenges of inclusive instruction.

<center>Teacher-Leaders</center>

In addition, the principal's main role was to be the instructional leader of the school, advising the teachers how to teach their diverse body of students. As the head of a formally appointed Instructional Leadership Team (ILT), the principal appointed and worked with teacher- leaders to select the specific focus for professional learning—for example, literacy instruction in the first year. With the initial ILT, the

<center>31</center>

principal delegated the task of guiding instructional initiatives to twelve teacher-leaders who were a diverse sample of academic expertise and personalities. In the following year, when the school staff expanded, department chairs made up the ILT (Admin_S1_050108). While the administrators ensured the funding and acquisition of instructional resources, like consultants and strategy packages, the teacher-leaders relayed information and provided guidance to the teaching staff. The principal's decision to have an instructional focus gave all teachers--general and special, across all content and grade levels-- a common goal for professional learning to converge.

Many of the teachers interviewed reported that receiving instructional support from their peers rather than from superiors or professionals outside of the school environment helped to create more open and free-flowing communication. One teacher said that the administrators' decision to rely on the leadership of the school's teachers helped to create a sense of "ownership" and "buy-in." She explained that other schools typically brought in instructional consultants from "the outside," creating a divide between the teachers and an individual whom they do not know other than in the context of the professional meeting. Establishing an "in-house" support system made collaborative resources more accessible for teachers (Teacher_E1_051410). For new teachers, knowledgeable and supportive teachers are especially helpful.   Coming into a new model for inclusion, let alone a new school, can be like "throwing an animal into a pack of wolves." The mentorship from teacher leaders can help typically overwhelmed novice teachers navigate the new system and practices (Teacher_S2_052907).

Formal Interpersonal

Although teachers were required to engage in collaborative activities with their fellow teachers, many reported how helpful and effective staff development was in supporting their needs. Across the interviews, teachers spoke about the benefits of mutual values and working together to problem-solve in a structured framework of professional learning. The general educators also frequently cited the relationships they had with Learning Support Coaches (special educators) who were formally assigned to their students. Most said that they consulted the LSCs regularly to address their students' needs.

Collaborative Staff Development

Teacher- to- teacher collaboration was another prevalent resource for navigating the challenges of inclusive instruction. As a formal staff community, all of the teachers participated in professional development to enhance their instructional expertise. These meetings were led by selected teacher- leaders and attended by their peers on a mandatory basis. The success of this professional development was largely attributed to its collaboration-based, "teacher-led and teacher-created" nature (Teacher_E1_051410). Teachers also generally appreciated the meetings' focus on the real, concrete strategy-based approach to instruction rather than vague ideas and characteristics of effective instruction.

In the first and second year, teachers participated in weekly meetings led by the inclusion expert and directly addressed inclusive education on one day of the week, with supplemental weekly meetings covering non-inclusion content on another day of the week. The sessions provided ideas for instructional strategies specifically

for inclusion, while training the teachers in the principles of inclusion and learning disabilities that their students faced. One teacher described these 30- minute meetings as one of the "number one" reasons that collaboration developed at Clearview. Because of collaborative meetings, "…we're always in a place that we can talk about students and ways to help students out," said the teacher (Teacher_SS2_060407). Another teacher said that the meetings helped to confirm the significance of instructional strategies she was already using in the classroom. The teacher said that despite not seeing the inclusion specialist frequently, the meetings facilitated "good" and "helpful" interactions.

In 2008, Clearview was awarded a grant of $295,000 from a state-based coalition for school reform supported by the federal "Race to the Top" fund. Clearview's administration and the Instructional Leadership Team decided to use a portion of the new funds to focus on improving literacy across the content areas. They believed that enhancing students' reading and communication skills would help all students, especially students with disabilities, to navigate and gain the most out of the challenging coursework. As a result, the weekly meetings were re-named "LIFTs" or "Literacy in Focus Teams" and were focused on literacy strategies and did not explicitly address inclusion. These meetings were led by teachers, organized by the Instructional Leadership Team, and attended by all general and special education teachers. The inclusion expert occasionally held meetings to continue addressing the inclusive education aspect of instruction.

One of the LIFT facilitators claimed that she received overwhelmingly positive feedback regarding the helpfulness of the collaborative, literacy-focused professional development. She referred to professional development as a "gauntlet" that teachers

must go through at Clearview, and that the teachers' positive experiences changed the nature of collaboration for the better (Teacher_E2_052209). When asked about Clearview's accomplishments in 2009, another teacher cited the LIFT sessions as the foremost vehicle for teacher and student success. The teacher said that the LIFT strategies united the teachers under a common mission. The teacher also said of the instructional resources, "I just feel like I'm being part of team by using them. And you know, they are working. I see the kids improving…" (Teacher_M7_051109). This sentiment was echoed in an interview during the previous year, as another teacher said that one positive aspect of working at Clearview was that she "always feel(s) like I'm learning from other teachers" through professional development structures like LIFT meetings (Teacher_SS4_112108).

Though the LIFT meetings were generally well-received, a few cited limitations of professional development specifically for literacy instruction. A teacher- facilitator indicated that she wanted to see some changes made to the LIFT practices, like making the sessions co-facilitated by general and special education teachers. She said that integrating more disability- specific practices would help differentiate the instructional strategies that she taught in the sessions. The teacher cited a stand-alone in-service day that meshed the instructional strategies with inclusion practices, but said that this type of professional development was not continued (Teacher_E2_052209). In addition, one math instructor had difficulties applying the strategies to that content area (Teacher_M6_052010). However, the department chair remarked that there had been significant growth from the previous year in terms of math teachers finding ways to use the strategies in their content area (Teacher_M3_052010). One teacher, in a 2009 interview, said that the ongoing and

pervasive nature of the professional development efforts was stressful, and at times, "trying" (Teacher_E5_051109).

By 2011, Clearview's Instructional Leadership Team decided to bring new content to the formal collaborative framework. With the assistance of funds acquired by the state through federal education reform and school improvement grants, the instructional strategies shifted from the literacy initiative to a program called "Learning-Focused Strategies," (LFS). In addition to the weekly instruction-focused meetings, there was an increase in follow-up expectations for teachers. While the department-based meetings occurred every Wednesday, teachers met in "collaborative pairs" every Thursday to plan the way they would specifically apply that week's strategy to their lessons. The inclusion expert no longer visited the school to conduct meetings explicitly regarding inclusion.

The administration bought the LFS package with recommendations from the inclusion expert who still communicated with the principal and other school leaders. Prior to the program's acquisition, some of the Clearview faculty had attended an LFS-based workshop. Through the Learning Focused Strategies program students are taught to use practices such as graphic organizers and extend thinking, to name two that were used specifically by the Clearview teachers. Teachers are trained to differentiate instruction and provide students with a choice of resources to drive learning, while meeting the expectations of the Common Core Standards. According to the product slogan, the primary goal of LFS is to "increase teacher effectiveness and accelerate student learning" (www.learningfocused.com).

The instructional leadership melded the name of the prior program "LIFT" with "LFS," and called these weekly professional development meetings "LiFtS."

Similar to the "LIFT" meetings, teachers were introduced to instructional strategies, tried them in their own classrooms, and reported back to their groups. The teachers worked together to share the successes of the strategies, even bringing in students' work to demonstrate their application of the instructional tools. If a strategy did not yield desired outcomes, teachers had the opportunity to brainstorm better strategy usage with their fellow teachers. The LiFtS groups met with teachers in their own content areas, with special educators (LSCs) mixed in throughout. One group was even led by an LSC, though the strategies were not directly addressed as strategies for students with special education services—instead, she was trained to speak about LFS strategies that were designed to benefit all types of learners.

Clearview's teachers continued meeting as LiFtS groups into the 2012-2013 school year, with weekly meetings revolving around specific LFS strategies. Much of the Fall 2012 meetings were devoted to "Extended Thinking Strategies," designed by the LFS program. In the later Fall/Winter months, the teachers focused on Unit Planning with the LFS program as a guideline.

The majority of teachers cited specific attitudes and values that made all of the professional collaboration initiatives (from 2006 to 2012) possible and, according to some, highly effective. In a 2009 interview, one teacher reflected on the professional meetings, citing the staff's strengths: "professionalism," being "life-long learners," and a drive for improvement (Teacher_S5_051109). Another teacher referred to her role as a first year teacher, saying that "it really wasn't what I thought it was going to be because I had additional supports… with the LIFT program and being able to discuss with my colleagues" (Teacher_ E4_112108). Others said that LiFtS in particular, helped to give the teachers the much-needed time to sit down and

collaborate, since they otherwise "don't often see each other because (they) are so busy." Out of the 40 responses to the survey, 33 of the teachers said that they agreed or strongly agreed that LiFtS "supported collaboration" (Survey_121312).

Though most of the teachers attested to the benefit of using strategies learned in the collaborative meetings, a few instructors cited limitations of the professional development workshops. One teacher said that he wasn't sure that all of the teachers knew why they were using the strategies or how to truly use the strategies to their full potential. The concerned teacher said that the novice teachers were especially "compliant, they'll try just about everything," but they were not fully aware of how to use the strategies (Teacher_S1_052610). A few teachers called the content/topics of the meetings "repetitive" and "redundant," since some of the material is reviewed from year to year to catch up the newer teachers (Survey_121312).

General Educator & LSC Collaboration

Inter-teacher collaboration also occurred between LSCs and general educators. Because LSCs had a prescribed case-load of students, the general educators became part of the problem-solving team as they worked together to adapt instruction to fit the students' needs and goals. In the first year, there was only one LSC, since there was originally only a 9th grade class. In the following years, more special education teachers and paraprofessionals were added to the schools' staff, each assigned to a grade level of students. By the time the school was filled with grades 9 through 12 in its fourth year, there was one LSC for each grade. In addition, there was one member of the special education team who took care of administrative tasks for the LSCs, students, and three paraprofessionals. Over the next year, three more LSCs were hired; one was assigned as a second 9th grade LSC and the other two worked across

content areas in 11th and 12th grade. Since the general education teachers typically taught one grade level, they collaborated with LSCs designated for that grade level.

The degree to which general education teachers collaborated and consulted with their students' LSC depended on several factors: how many students with IEPs a teacher had in one class, how experienced a teacher was with special education or inclusive instruction. Most teachers had positive comments about working with the LSCs. In 2007, a teacher said that the LSC she consulted on a regular basis "works so well with the teachers" because of constant, daily "feedback" (Teacher_S2_052907). The same teacher noted that they work together to address student needs, and that the LSC helped with responsibilities like communicating with parents and monitoring student progress. Another teacher, in a separate interview, stated that this same LSC is a helpful "liaison between parents and the teachers." Of another LSC, one teacher said that she was "always on the job… always coming to the teachers" to help out and advise the teachers on improving instruction for their inclusive classes. This teacher also cited "open communication" as the key to successful collaboration of general and special educators. Because they were neither co-teaching nor sharing a classroom, the LSC had to be accessible through e-mail, scheduled meetings, planning periods, and classroom visits (Teacher_S3_111607).

Another teacher, though a highly experienced instructor, advocated for using the LSCs as resources: "I find that the people with special education degrees— pedagogy is their strong point—so use it!" This teacher also said that "weak teachers… don't listen to suggestions" because they "choose not to grow" as instructors of diverse student abilities (Teacher_ E1_0513). Another said that working with the LSCs simply "makes your job a lot easier" (Teacher_S1_050109). When

asked about how comfortable she is having a special education teacher give teaching advice, yet another said that she was because the LSCs were "not going to… be critical of my teaching… I feel that she is very discrete" and "invaluable" to improving instructional potential (Teacher_E2_052209).

The teachers also reported the general educator/ LSC collaboration's influence on student success. One teacher said that "there are a few students who have IEPs that what Teacher_L1 does for them, I would not be able to do for them on an individual basis during class time" (Teacher_E6_051410). By allowing an LSC into their classrooms periodically, the teachers said that more of the students' needs could be addressed. Another teacher said that consulting with her students' LSC helped her meet student needs because the special education teachers "know those students so well" and know exactly what "would really work well with this student" (Teacher_ E4_112108). Another teacher said, "If I didn't collaborate with (an LSC) on a daily basis, I would not be giving adequate support to my students with IEPs" (Teacher_E2_110507).

The only negative feedback that teachers gave regarding their collaboration with LSCs was that some of the LSCs were "overwhelmed" with the amount of students' needs, and the limited amount of time that some of the LSCs were facing. One teacher, in a 2010 interview, stated that she needed more LSCs for her grade level, and that "one isn't enough" (Teacher_E6_041410). A few teachers said that their interactions with LSCs were not as prevalent in their instructional decisions because they did not have many students with IEPs (Teacher_S5_051109). The teachers viewed their use of LSCs as needs-based, so some teachers rated themselves

as lower on this scale, while others, especially classes with a high concentration of students with special needs, were in more demand of working with LSCs.

Informal Interpersonal

Beyond the interactions that were part of the school's operating framework, teachers also engaged in independent practices that they claimed benefited their instruction. Since their community valued collaboration at various levels, teachers reported co-planning and consulting their fellow professionals. By respecting one another's expertise and co-constructing solutions to the challenges presented by students' diverse learning needs, teachers reported this behavior as essential to success as an educator at Clearview.

Teacher Co-Planning & Consultation

The aforementioned school-based structures encouraged, and often required, collaborative practices across educators' areas of expertise. In addition to the mandatory, formal collaboration used to improve inclusive instruction practices at Clearview, teachers reported independently interacting with other teachers for a similar purpose. General education teachers cited a general desire to open their lines of communication to accomplish their goals as Clearview instructors. Many of the general educators also cited specific examples of partnerships they created on their own to problem-solve for their own instructional needs. These collaborative behaviors were used at the planning and reflection stages of instruction, and were used to problem-solve resulting from the anticipation or identification of challenges presented by both regular and special education students.

One general education teacher pointed out that at the school she previously worked at (in the same district), teachers would typically "close the door," and give the message of "I don't want to talk; I'm going to do it my way." She also said that "collaboration wasn't occurring, but if it was, it was purely, 'hey can I have your lessons, great thanks.'" This same teacher summed up the failure at "true collaboration" as "very frustrating" (Teacher_S5_051109). In contrast, teachers described collaboration at Clearview as part of the school's culture. One teacher described it as a constant push of 'let me help you' from other teachers, who shared "unlimited resources." The general education teacher said that this approach had been "non-stop" since she started teaching at Clearview (Teacher _E4_112108). Another teacher described this collaborative culture as one of the most necessary qualities to succeed with Clearview's goals. The teacher said in a 2007 interview, "You can't be successful—your students can't be successful—if you don't collaborate" (Teacher_E2_110507).

Teachers reported co-planning content and strategies with teachers that taught the same subjects. For example, one English teacher claimed that she and another English teacher collaborated on a regular basis. She said that if she did not collaborate with this other teacher, their classes "wouldn't be as efficient, as successful" (Teacher_E2_110507). In an interview two years later, the same teacher said that she and yet another English teacher "plan everything together—our classrooms are mirror images of each other." She called this collaborative partnership "an unplanned, beautiful 'marriage'" that was "totally wonderful!" (Teacher_E2_052209). Also in 2009, a Social Studies teacher reported working with four other teachers in the department, who "some days… literally doing the exact same things" and "other

days…teaching the same content but maybe not the same exact way." The teacher described their co-planning methods as brainstorming over lunch or exchanging ideas over email (Teacher_SS5_052209). One of the math teachers spoke of collaborating with a fellow math teacher to trade ideas not only on methods, but with reflection procedures—if they noticed similar challenges between their classes, they would revisit the curriculum to reconsider pacing of certain concepts that proved problematic (Teacher_M5_121307).

General educators also claimed to work with teachers from different content areas, as well. One English teacher said that he communicated with the teachers in his classroom's proximity: a science teacher, a social studies teacher, and a math teacher. Of these three, he said that he most frequently collaborated with the science teacher, having a "weekly conversation about strategies that have worked and not worked" with their students (Teacher_E5_051109). Some teachers said that they wished they could informally collaborate with other teachers more often. The most limiting factor for the teachers was lack of common planning time and other scheduling conflicts. One Social Studies teacher "would love to work more with the English teachers," but could not in that particular year because of scheduling. He/she said that cross-content collaboration would help to bring more "credibility" or "reinforcement" to the students' use of learning strategies (Teacher_SS5_052209).

Of teacher collaboration in general, one teacher observed that "everybody works together… to eliminate as many obstacles or problems as we possibly can." This science teacher said this was a "good" thing (Teacher_S2_052907). Several teachers described Clearview's collaborative practices as "building a community" and the teaching staff as a "team."

Informal Intrapersonal

Teachers reflected on their own values and attitudes as a members of Clearview's PLC. They stressed the importance of the desire to improve how they reached their students' needs and of using the work they do in their collaborative activities to inform instructional decisions. Administrators also remarked on the hiring process and of how they sought teachers who had open attitudes to the founders' values of collaborating for inclusion. Teachers came into the school with these dispositions and reported that they were strengthened when put into practice at Clearview.

Teacher Disposition

In Clearview's hiring process, teachers reported that administrators were very clear about their expectations of teachers: they must be willing to teach inclusive classes and collaborate with others on a regular basis. According to the school's principal, teachers were also "recruited specifically" under the notion that they would "responsible for all students' success." The principal hired teachers who had a predisposition for "flexibility" that would help them with the myriad of experiments the school would undertake to figure out how they were going to set up their inclusive model (Admin_S1_052907).

One teacher said that to be a teacher at Clearview, one must be not only open, but committed to a "continuous improvement model" (Teacher_E1_051311). Another teacher said that teachers must be willing to operate in a model that dictates "more work, more stress… but ultimately benefits students" (Teacher_E2_110507). In another 2007 interview, a teacher stressed having "an open mind and an open attitude"

about teaching at Clearview. This teacher also echoed the principal's sentiment about flexibility towards working with challenging students and the dynamic school environment (Teacher_S3_111607). Other general ed. teachers stressed a "positive attitude" and a strong work ethic (Teacher_M4_060407).

Additionally, working within this particular vision for inclusion was said to change teachers' outlook on teaching students with disabilities. Since the teachers shared a common understanding that they were responsible for providing accommodations for students with IEPs, one teacher said that it "changes you whole attitude of working with the kids" and that general education teachers see their "role is as of the special education teacher… not a general ed. teacher that works for special ed. kids." The teacher went on to say that their model inspires "a whole different mindset" (Teacher_SS5_052209).

<div align="center">Instructional Decisions</div>

The attitudes teachers assumed consequently influenced the decision- making and individual thinking surrounding instruction. When asked about instructional techniques used to teach their particular students, many teachers referred to strategies found in the larger discussion held in their PLC. The content and strategies were part of the decisions that teachers make on a daily basis to meet their students' needs.

One teacher cited the "chunking" strategy gleaned from early meetings surrounding inclusive instruction techniques. She said that she figured out how to break concepts into "fine, little components" which she found "beneficial for everyone." The same teacher also credited the use of "cooperative structures," or collaborative student activities. She said "I like pair shares… it just helps sometimes to promote thought, especially for a pre-reading strategy." The pre-reading strategies

were part of the literacy focus in the school's early strategy-base efforts, called "Lift" (Teacher_E1_052307).

Another instructional strategy that teachers brought into their classrooms was the graphic organizer, a way to arrange ideas and show relationships between concepts. One teacher said she used graphic organizers to "break things down" and build upon ideas by adding more content to an existing graphic organizer (Teacher_E3_121007). Another English teacher said, "I'm always looking for opportunities to add graphic organizers and a lot of times I'll make those available, but not mandatory." In addition, the teacher also used an appeal to learners though visual and oral modeling. "I try to provide samples of every task that I assign… also communicating expectations before work is done," the teacher said. She gave examples like giving assessment rubrics to the students up front as well as breaking projects into manageable chunks, with each segment having its own set of directions, expectations, and examples (Teacher_E2_110507).

For math teachers, organizing concepts for students came with the introduction of flip charts, which one teacher referred to as an "alternative" to note-taking (Teacher_M3_052010). Other math teachers cited their decisions to use "word walls… webs and diagrams to try to make the kids see the connections" (Teacher_M4_060407).

Several other teachers in the non-English Language Arts classes described using literacy- focused strategies learned in professional development meetings to enhance their instruction. Some science teachers indicated vocabulary instruction, including one that had students use drawing techniques to help learn key words (Teacher_S4_110708). Another teacher had students write rap songs to engage

students in content. Rather than strictly memorizing concepts, the instructional strategies used required students to apply composition skills to a topic they typically did not write about (Teacher_S3_111607). The teachers talked about their willingness to "try new things" to encourage student learning and success, a prevalent attitude at Clearview that proved to inform many instructional decisions in the classroom.

The focus on student learning at Clearview was not something that lived only in the immediate classroom setting and occurred between teacher and student alone. The conversation surrounding inclusive instruction and instructional strategies came from the school's vision, was fostered by the administration and school leaders, took place in professional development meetings, transferred between teachers, and was applied to various content areas for diverse learners. According to the general education teachers, their concerns for addressing all of their students' needs were addressed through this network of interactions. Clearview was said to be a place where they could always have the conversation about instruction and find valuable resources to improve their instructional potential. Because of this built-in, resource-based support system, the vast majority of teachers reported that they were highly satisfied with their jobs and had no inclination of leaving the school. As one teacher put it, "Teachers want to be here." She went on to clarify, "I can't speak for everybody, but for me, it seems as if everybody wants to be here and that we're happy and we love teaching and love the job" (Teacher_ S2_052907). This sentiment echoed throughout the interviews and was attributed to the collaborative community where teachers and students could thrive.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

My original research questions addressed *how* general educators teach in an inclusive environment. At first, I used my prior knowledge and the early literature to assume that it was simply the instructional strategies used to maintain an inclusive learning environment. After examining the experience at Clearview, I discovered that an entire network of support (a PLC) influenced how general educators taught their classes. Because I wanted to make sense of this supportive network, I developed a grounded theory, found a framework in which to view the PLC, and discovered how formal interactions seemed to 'set up' the potential for informal practices. The ongoing conversation about inclusion and the drive to keep improving how they accomplished this challenge seemed to lead to the school's successes, as reported by the teachers.

Clearview exercised its potential for instructional improvement using a school-wide approach, or through a complex PLC. The school developed its inclusion initiative at the organizational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels of interaction, involving stakeholders from school founders and administrators to the teaching staff and students. In creating formal opportunities for collaboration, expertise- and resource-sharing, the stakeholders showed that they were likely to engage in these practices independently, or on an informal basis. Working together to improve instruction required a common mission, a diverse set of expertise and experience,

willingness to collaborate and share with others, mutual respect for others' professional expertise, and opportunities to build professional relationships. Other elements that may have been helpful in this process included common instructional strategies and meeting spaces created to encourage collaboration.

Clearview's PLC benefitted from the school's clear values and goals for student learning. Labeling themselves as "inclusive" meant that not only did they permit students with disabilities into regular classrooms, but they were committed to these students' success. Effective instruction for *all* students, regardless of abilities, was a goal that permeated school community and is a target in each of the PLC's four capacities. Teachers across content areas said that the school's culture valued "constant improvement," reflecting on practices in order to move forward in the interest of their students. Having resources and support to achieve their goals seemed to be a driving motivation for the teachers to "get on board" with the initiatives for inclusion and accept the challenges of inclusive instruction.

Implications for Practice

If teachers' needs are met with effective resources, they have the potential to be more effective educators. Schools must provide outlets for teachers of different areas of expertise to collaborate on initiatives such as inclusion. According to Conoley and Conoley (2010), people who feel supported with an array of resources are much happier and can perform their jobs more effectively. With inclusion in particular, having support structures can help general education teachers be effective

independent instructors—reducing or eliminating the need for co-teaching or separate

classes for special education students. Teachers can enjoy autonomy in their

classrooms and be respected as a teacher that can teach a diverse body of learners.

When teachers do their jobs well and are evaluated by supervisors as such,

teachers see themselves as effective teachers as well. This assessment builds teachers

self-efficacy or "improved professional satisfaction (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010, pg.

59). When employed people are satisfied with their job, they are less likely to leave it

for another. This is especially important in the field of education, where it is

imperative that good teachers stay in the teaching profession. In a University of

Delaware study, the 60% of teachers that reported they were "satisfied" with their jobs

attributed this self-report to positive mentoring experiences, as well as supportive

professional development. The teachers that left their jobs, left within their first three

years of teaching, and attributed their decision in part to lack of support in the form of

mentorship or professional learning opportunities (Raffel & Beck, 2005).

Although expanded and more consistent standards for special education

coursework in general teacher education programs could benefit pre-service teachers,

it is not the only way to prepare teachers for the challenges of inclusion. By providing

pre-service teachers with knowledge about being an active member of a school's PLC,

they could be more prepared to work through challenges as teachers. If pre-service

teacher programs are designed to be more collaborative, problem-solving in nature,

these practices could help develop the types of behaviors found in a PLC. That way,

novice teachers will know how to use the resources they have in a school setting.

For students with disabilities, being in a school where their education is of equal priority to their peers without disabilities can mean the difference between success and failure (Deshler & Schumaker, 2006). Students whose teachers constantly improve instruction can benefit from the changes made to more effectively address their learning needs. When students have more tools to access content and develop their skills, they achieve curriculum expectations and succeed academically. With these positive results, students—especially those with disabilities—gain a sense of confidence and develop a sense of belonging. Instead of being labeled "special ed.," these students see themselves as part of the whole student body, in a classroom surrounded by their peers (Eisenman et al, 2010). These attitudes lend to increased attendance and engagement in learning, which can increase students' likelihood to meet academic expectations and graduate from high school.

Implications for Research

Because the findings were interpreted from a single case, it is not my intent to suggest that this school's model can be directly replicated. However, certain elements within similar contexts are likely to be transferable (Lincoln, & Guba, 1990). For example, to improve instruction, schools can attempt to develop or strengthen their own professional learning community by focusing on the four capacities that I drew from the Clearview model. Understanding interactions in their distinct levels, from the organizational to the intrapersonal can help reformers focus on specific areas of

improvement (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Furthermore, the model illustrates that informal interactions, from teacher collaboration to individual instructional decisions and teacher dispositions, can be influenced by the formal structures set up by school leaders and administration. This knowledge can help leaders make decisions from the organizational level to encourage beneficial practices in the more individualized capacities.

Further examination of the attitudes and dispositions conducive to participation in a PLC could benefit administrators in the hiring process. This study addressed some of the qualities the administrators looked for when bringing in teachers (i.e. willingness to teach students with diverse learning needs and collaborate with staff to problem-solve). However, it did not further reflect the administrators' level of satisfaction they had with teachers as they worked in the school. Further study could yield an analysis of the teachers' practices as seen through the lens of their supervisors—as well as according to the students and families they serve.

Strengths & Limitations

As described previously, I undertook multiple steps to enhance the trustworthiness of my findings. I did not rely solely on a priori concepts, but instead searched through multiple participants' perspectives to triangulate and member-check the validity of my interpretation. This interpretive study benefited from my access to recorded interviews, so that I was able to pull direct quotations to convey the teachers' experiences. This lent to a *thick description* that respected individuality of participants while I sought the common occurrences across the data. The objectivity of my developing ideas was assisted by regular meetings with my thesis adviser, checking

that my interpretation was accurate to what she had seen herself while conducting the in-person interviews herself from the start of the original study. Through these regular peer debriefing sessions, my adviser ensured that the *characteristics* that I illustrated in the final concept map took all of the relevant findings from the substudy into consideration.

Additionally, my work was strengthened by *member-checking* practices at various stages of the research. In the original study, interviews included questions about phenomena or practices in the school that others had mentioned in earlier interviews or themes that were emerging from data analyses across participants. Interviewees then had the opportunity to confirm or clarify these ideas from their perspectives. In my own study, I made my own observations of teacher meetings and used brief surveys in the Fall of 2012 to gauge the strength of four different ideas from my own analyses. Forty (40) teachers participated in the survey and generally, my characterizations of their collective experience were true, though differed between strength of agreement. The teachers provided written feedback in a comments section to explain their answers more thoroughly and share specific strengths or limitations of professional development practices in particular. By the end of the study, I had a *triangulation* of data between interviews, observations, and surveys as well as triangulation across researchers

My study was limited to the 25 general education teachers interviewed across the five years, with a heavy concentration of data found in the second year. Not all of the general education teachers were interviewed in every year of the case study. Although I reviewed transcripts of interviews from the principal and the superintendent, I did not review interview transcripts of the LSCs (the special

educators), guidance counselors, the students, and their parents. Instead I relied on summaries and interpretations provided by my thesis advisor in her role as principal investigator of the larger case study. Although my own analyses of other participants' perspectives may have shed additional light on the impact of the Clearview PLC, time limitations did not permit me to include such work within this substudy. Additional dimensions and perspectives of the larger case study can be found in other reports (e.g., Eisenman, Pleet, Wandry, & McGinley, 2010; Quann et al., in review; Eisenman & Pleet-Odle, in review).

From the researcher's perspective, this study is limited because I did not conduct the interviews myself. I relied partly on the work of my adviser and her assistants to conduct the interviews that I used as evidence in this study. While some of the interviews were transcribed by these people, I transcribed the majority of the conversations with general education teachers and used my own interpretation of their words to come to an understanding of their experiences. Because I was not the one to conduct the interviews, I may have missed out on some interactions and non-verbal communication, such as facial expressions and gestures. And since I am only a novice at this writing—a student-teacher and not a practiced educator—my understanding of the teachers' experiences is somewhat limited. Though I have some experience myself instructing an inclusive class and participating in professional development meetings, it is not as extensive as the experiences shared by the Clearview teachers. This difference in experiences has the potential to hinder my complete understanding of the study's findings.

Finally, the school's ultimate goal—student achievement as a result of teaching practices—was not measured nor described as part of this research. Though the

literature and teachers' perceptions suggested that instructional practices used by the teachers ultimately benefitted students, this particular case does not examine Clearview's student achievement. However, Clearview's efforts exemplify a "growth mindset" (Dweck, 2010), meaning that they believe that students' abilities can develop as a result of instruction. By improving instruction for all students, including those with disabilities, the research suggests that this type of thinking can lead to measurable student achievement. Also, most teachers offered specific examples of how they believed the school's inclusive culture and the teachers' instructional strategies supported students' academic and social growth.

Conclusion

This 10- month interpretive study confirmed several ideas found in literature about inclusive instruction, school reform, leadership, professional development, collaboration, and professional learning communities (PLC). My work applied these elements to the context of inclusion and elaborated the nature of interactions in this type of PLC. It highlighted the importance of collaboration, the need for effective leadership, common instructional strategies, shared professional expertise, and teachers who are willing to engage in continuous improvement. Together these elements supported general educators in to provide effective instruction in inclusive classrooms, which are becoming the new normal of the American public education system.

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TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

<u>Teacher Interview Questions</u>

*Introduction
*Remind about confidentiality and privacy, including right to end interview or not answer questions
*Explain purpose of audiotaping
*Preferred pseudonym? Questions?

For new teachers: 1) Before you came to [SCHOOL] where did you teach/work, and what did you do there? Why did you decide to apply to teach at [SCHOOL]? What did you know about [SCHOOL] before you arrived?

For returning teachers: 1) How have your role and responsibilities at St. Georges changed over the last year/since we last met (if they have)?

2) What courses do you teach at [SCHOOL]?

3) What other responsibilities do you have at [SCHOOL]?

4) What are some examples of ways that you interact with the learning support teachers?

5) What are some examples of ways that you interact with the inclusion consultant?

6) Are there other people with whom you collaborate or resources you consult when designing curriculum or instruction for your students? For _____ or other students who have IEPs?

7) What are the accomplishments or successes that you are most proud of so far?

8) What have been your greatest challenges so far?

9) What are some examples of teaching techniques or approaches that you use to help make sure that as many students as possible understand what you are teaching and are involved in learning activities? Are these new for you?

10) What types of accommodations and special instructional services/supports do you provide (or help to provide) to _____ (target student/s)?

      What has been your greatest success with _____ ? What has been your greatest challenge with _____?

      What accommodations, services, or other supports would you like to provide but have not or have not been able to? What would help you to provide those supports?

11) In terms of students with IEPs, do you think it would be difficult for [SCHOOL] to meet particular students' needs? If so, why?
      At this time, [SCHOOL] is best able to meet these needs….[SCHOOL] would struggle to meet these needs…..

12) What do you see as strengths with [SCHOOL]' efforts to provide inclusive education for students?
      Where do you see weaknesses in [SCHOOL]' inclusive education efforts?

13) What are [SCHOOL]' greatest strengths as a school? What are the things that you think could change to improve the school?

14) What should be included in the preparation of new teachers for [SCHOOL]?

      * Is there anything else that you'd like to say? Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Collaborative Practices	
Physical Setup	**Observations** *Are the teachers sitting in small groups or one large group?* *Are they in the same setup during the entire meeting or does it change depending on the activity?* *Does this setup support collaboration/ teachers sharing their expertise to achieve a common goal?*
Teacher Roles	**Observations** *Who are the leaders of the workshop and what do they do that makes them leaders?* *What areas of expertise (content, special ed., etc.) are represented at this meeting?*
Tasks Performed	**Observations** *What do the leaders ask the teachers to do at this meeting?* *Are all of the teachers present participating in the activities?*

Instructional Strategies	
Topics & Themes	**Observations** *What are the "big ideas" discussed/ addressed in these meetings?* *Are these topics ones that affect students with IEPs?*
Specific Devices & Strategies	**Observations** *What are the names of the strategies introduced in the workshop?* *What do these devices aim to achieve?*

Classroom Applications	
Adaptable to students' needs	**Observations** *Do the teachers talk about how the strategies can benefit students with disabilities?* *Do teachers make suggestions to adapt or modify the strategy based on concerns about students with disabilities?*
Adaptable to content areas	**Observations** *How do teachers from different content areas adapt the strategies to fit the needs of their own discipline?*

TEACHER SURVEY QUESTIONS

Thank you for taking a few minutes to share your views about the most recent set of teacher-led workshop sessions at your school. This information will help me better understand how workshops such as these may benefit teachers working in inclusive settings. Your individual responses are confidential. Please circle the response that best reflects your views:

1.   **LiFtS weekly sessions are responsive to my needs as a teacher.**

Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

2.   **The strategies presented in LiFtS are adaptable to my students' needs.**

Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

3.   **After participating in LiFtS, I feel more confident in my ability to teach an inclusive classroom.**

Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

4.   **LiFtS weekly workshops support collaboration between teachers.**

Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

5.   **Comments pertaining to any of the above statements are highly encouraged and may be written below and continued on backside of page, if needed:**