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Professional Growth of Special Education Personnel Through the Use of a Collaborative Process

A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

by

Stephanie Smith Walker

August 2010

Dr. Pamela Scott, Chair

Dr. Cecil Blankenship

Dr. Virginia Foley

Dr. Eric Glover

Keywords: professional development, professional growth, collaboration

ABSTRACT

Professional Growth of Special Education Personnel Through the Use of a Collaborative Process

by

Stephanie S. Walker

This qualitative case study examined how special educators perceived their professional growth as a result of engagement in a collaborative process. Sixteen special educators participated in the research. Triangulation was attained through the use of document review, a focus group, and personal interviews. The 15 themes and patterns that emerged from data collection were: (a) increased expertise and use of technology, (b) exhibited collaborative skills and improved interpersonal relationships, (c) developed increased understanding of curriculum, (d) presented evidence of increased job satisfaction, (e) demonstrated analytical abilities, (f) illustrated enhancement in professional and creative expression, (g) understood the special education supervisor's role, (h) awareness of the expertise of others, (i) increased respect from school professionals, (j) increased knowledge of current research, (k) leadership skills, (l) enhanced time management and organizational skills, (m) established consistency within the special education department, (n) developed diverse thinking, and (o) developed self-evaluation skills and empowerment. I concluded that while professional skills increased, a noticeable increase in morale, job satisfaction, empowerment, and self-confidence was observed. This case study could be of interest to school administrators in planning professional development, assessing how present staff development correlates with the collaborative process, and determining if modifications should be made.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my husband, sons, and grandson. I love you all dearly and am grateful for your encouragement and support. Your patience and willingness to stand by me throughout this process have made accomplishing this dissertation possible. To my precious first grandson William Franklin Walker, who was born while I was working on my dissertation, you are a blessing and a joy. My hope is that you have a love of learning like your Nana.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Does requiring teachers to participate in staff development foster personal growth and skill development? This question is often the topic of researchers in educational journals and professional organizations and of federal and state educational laws. In 1995 the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) created standards for staff development for professionals. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Public Law 107-110 (2002), also called the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) included a provision for skill building and continuing staff development for teachers. Many states have developed guidelines for staff development. In 1997 the Tennessee State Board of Education approved the Tennessee Framework for Evaluation and Professional Growth for teachers. These guidelines included staff development as a required component of the teacher evaluation process. Wong (2002) suggested that staff development for teachers is the best investment a school system makes.

One approach to staff development is working in groups or collaboration. Although the collaborative process is not the traditional method of staff development for teaching professionals, the process is becoming more common (Lee, 2005). Benefits to teachers in professional growth and skill development can be made possible through a paradigm shift in learning. Seradigm (2006) defined a paradigm as “a set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitutes a way of viewing reality for the community that shares them” (p.1). Hamilton and Richardson (1995) indicated that professional training for teachers should focus on engaging teachers in collaborative groups. Skrtic (1991) noted that schools find it hard to deviate from standardization in their products and services, therefore, finding it difficult to implement a team teaching process.

Kirk and Walter (1981) discussed collaborative groups as *topical* groups, those primarily concerned with a specific topic, and *membership* groups, members with similar interests such as teachers of the same grade. Too much divergence in a membership group could result in loss of valuable time. Time that could be used in collaboration may be lost due to the lack of common goals and interests among group members. In contrast their research suggests that too much homogeneity in a group may decrease the depth and overall continuum of discussion of ideas. Kirk and Walter assert it might be more valuable to incorporate both criteria through joining educational personnel with similar interests and tasks within the organization with a broad interpersonal base that lends itself to a variety of topic interactions.

Sykes (1996) suggested that improving the educational process for students must begin with continuous learning on the part of teachers. Furthermore, Sykes linked being a great teacher to being a lifelong learner and saw this as one positive effect on a student's achievement and success. Many researchers (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Fullan & Steigelbauer, 1991; Resnick, 2005) have found a direct correlation between the levels of student achievement and professional development of teachers.

In this research the perceptions of the participants are compared with my perceptions in regards to their professional growth and skill development. I perceived that the team participants have: (a) increased expertise and use of technology, (b) exhibited collaborative skills and improved interpersonal relationships, (c) developed increased understanding of curriculum, (d) presented evidence of increased job satisfaction, (e) demonstrated analytical abilities, and (f) illustrated enhancement in professional and creative expression.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this case study was to examine the perceptions of professional growth and skill development of special education personnel as a result of participation on the Research and Development Team in Roane County, Tennessee. Areas of growth examined included:

(a) increased expertise and use of technology, (b) exhibited collaborative skills and improved interpersonal relationships, (c) developed increased understanding of curriculum, (d) presented evidence of increased job satisfaction, (e) demonstrated analytical abilities, and (f) illustrated enhancement in professional and creative expression. The question to be answered was, “How do team members’ perceptions of their professional growth differ from my perceptions and how are they similar?”

Research Questions

The following research questions provide the focus for this qualitative case study as I examine collaborative participation of participants on the Research and Development Team.

1. How do special education team members define professional growth and skill development as a result of collaborative participation?
2. What do special education team members perceive as benefits of being a member of this team compared to my perceptions?
3. What have special education team members learned from participation on the team?
4. How do special education team members’ perceptions of their professional growth differ from my perceptions and how they are similar?

Significance of the Study

The constantly evolving field of special education requires continuous training for personnel. It is a challenge for administrators and teachers to find materials and opportunities for

professional growth that are both meaningful and relevant. In an effort to provide quality opportunities for special education professionals administrators often offer opportunities for training that are not significant and applicable (Birman, Desimone, & Porter, 2000).

Collaboration with other professionals who share a similar knowledge base is one way meaningful training can occur (Lee, 2005).

In 2004, as Special Education Supervisor, I developed the Research and Development Team that comprised 25 special education personnel including a combination of special education teachers, school psychologists, speech pathologists, and an audiologist. Initially the plan for the 2 weeks was established to work on completion of aligning standards to state goals and writing objectives for special education teachers to use in program development. This first group required detailed guidance from me in establishing a task list. The 2004 summer session was successful in accomplishing original goals while also initiating new projects. The Research and Development Team now requires minimal guidance from me and develops its own task list. The task list may include: (a) needs within the system, (b) materials to be developed, and (c) development of future task lists.

The original team was composed of 25 special education personnel; however, composition of the team has changed over the last 5 years. Fifteen personnel of the original team returned every year over the last 5 years. Four personnel have taken part for 4 years, and four others have participated for 3 years, making a total of 23 special education personnel who have a 3 to 5 year return rate on the team. Eleven other personnel have participated 1 to 2 years on the team. This case study examines the impact of collaborative planning on the professional growth of these special education personnel. Furthermore, results of the study will be made available to school administrators to facilitate planning and maximize staff development activities.

Scope of the Study

I examined the professional growth and skill development of special education personnel who have participated on the Research and Development Team in Roane County, Tennessee, using a qualitative case study. Data were collected from three separate but related sources that include a focus group, personal interviews and a review of documents. First, I collected data via a focus group using a semi-structured guide. Next, independent interviewers conducted personal interviews of special education participants using a semi-structured guide. Finally, I reviewed documents related to the Research and Development Team from 2004-2008. I explained in my analysis of the data the patterns and themes.

Limitations of the Study

Because the qualitative case study was limited to special education personnel located in Roane County Schools in Tennessee, the results of the study may not be generalized to personnel in other special education populations. I am the Special Education Supervisor and originator of the collaborative team and fully acknowledge personal biases. Having supervised the special education personnel I may have preconceived beliefs concerning their abilities and attitudes.

Definitions of Terms

1. Collaboration –Working together to reach a common goal (Myers, 1991).
2. In-service training - The traditional system of training professionals that is essential, but no longer sufficient to meet the needs of professionals in the field of teaching (Villegas-Reimers, 2003).
3. National Staff Development Council – The leading association for staff development.

4. No Child Left Behind – The 2001 federal educational reform program and reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that requires sustainable and skill building staff development with follow-up training.
5. Professional development –Opportunities for increasing the knowledge and skills of employees in business and professional organizations (Morgan, 2007).
6. Professional growth –Growth and skill development that special education personnel have gained through their participation on the Research and Development Team.
7. Research and Development Team – A group of special education personnel who Collaborate 2 weeks each summer in Roane County Schools in Tennessee.
8. Special education personnel – Teachers, school psychologists, system-wide literacy leaders, compliance leader, transition leader, speech pathologist, and audiologists.
9. Staff development – Opportunities for increasing the knowledge and skills of employees in business and professional organizations (Morgan, 2007).
10. Team – The group of special education personnel that participated on the Research and Development Team.

Overview of the Study

Chapter 1 includes an introduction to the study, statement of problem, research questions, significance, scope and limitations of the study, definitions of terms, and an overview. Chapter 2 reviews available literature on professional growth and the collaborative process as it relates to teachers' professional growth and skill development. Chapter 3 describes the methods and procedures including the research questions, data collection, interviews, ethical protocol,

document review, data analysis, quality and verification, and summary. Chapter 4 presents the analysis and summary of data. Chapter 5 summarizes the findings, recommendations for implementation, recommendations for future research, and conclusion.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Definitions of Staff Development

Characteristics of quality staff development for teachers have continued to be a vital component of national and state reform efforts in the field of public education (Rose & Gallup, 1999). Although there are many definitions of staff development, they tend to be similar in meaning and purpose. Morgan (2007) commented that professional development is essential for every individual and fundamental for every business and professional organization with the goal of increasing the knowledge and skills of their employees. Glatthorn (1995) stated, “Teacher development is the professional growth a teacher achieves as a result of gaining increased experiences and examining his or her teaching systematically” (p. 41). Villegas-Reimers (2003) suggested that the broad definition of development of a person in his or her professional role is called *professional development*. He also stated that *in-service training*, the traditional system of professional development, is still essential but no longer sufficient to meet the needs of professionals in the teaching field. Gould (2008) described staff development as a passive activity in which teachers sit and listen, hoping to gain one or two relevant ideas for their classroom. Panitz (1996) suggested that growth through staff development is a necessary component of an employee’s continuous skill development.

Professional development is essential in all professions. Morgan (2007) commented that time scheduled for professional development and how employees are compensated for participation differs significantly in public schools when compared to the business sector. Schools typically have not compensated teachers for professional development. In contrast, the

time employees in the business sector spend in training is part of their salary and often occurs during the course of the work day.

Belden and Plattner (1999) noted that while continuing education is promoted, participants in a 1999 Gallup Poll emphasized that parents are inconvenienced and students lose instructional time when teachers have built-in professional development days. However, business professionals have supported professional development as important. There needs to be support for professional development in the educational setting in order to optimize growth among teachers as well (Darling-Hammond & Barata-Snowden, 2007; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

Renzulli (2009) noted that the generic view of professional growth is the professional goes somewhere to obtain new professional skills. Kawasaki (2004) suggested that professional growth is not training people. He recommended that the word *training* needs to be eliminated from administrators' vocabularies. Norton and Lewis (2000) concurred that professional development is a cooperative process with a plan rather than each person seeking different paths and attempting to improve through attending just one workshop. Twenty-seven studies reviewed by McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership (2005) noted that it was difficult to determine one definition for professional development.

History of Staff Development

In 1995 the National Staff Development Council (NSDC), a national association of staff development for educational professionals in the United States, created its original 27 standards. In 2001 NSDC revisions resulted in a reduction to 12 standards. These standards stressed that staff development must be results driven, standards based, job embedded, and directed toward improvement of the quality of collaborative work. NSDC has held the position that “well

designed and implemented professional development for school employees is an essential long-term investment in successfully teaching all students to high standards” (National Staff Development Council, 2001, p. 3).

In 1997 the Tennessee State Board of Education approved the Tennessee Framework for Evaluation and Professional Growth and emphasized the importance of staff development as a teacher evaluation process for personal and professional growth (Hutchins & Yates, 2006). The framework includes a component that requires professional development based on each teacher’s summative evaluation. This framework became effective in 2000 and emphasized a growth oriented process that encouraged collaborative efforts and lifelong learning for teachers. In 2004 the framework was revised to align with the highly qualified provisions of the NCLB Act (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2006).

The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) mandated high quality staff development in order to “improve and increase teachers’ knowledge of the academic subjects the teachers teach, and enable teachers to become highly qualified” (p. 539). The federal program does not include 1-day or short-term workshops or conferences as professional development. NCLB included sustainable staff developments that increased teacher expertise and required follow-up training available for teacher participants to promote the implementation of new knowledge and skills in the classroom setting. Instruction in the use of data and assessment to improve classroom practices were also important components of staff development for teachers in NCLB (Title IX Section 9101 (34) of ESEA).

The Public Education Network and The Finance Project (2005) discussed challenges for the federal government, states, districts, schools, and teachers. This publication noted that the federal government’s main role in professional development is to hold states accountable while

providing guidelines for teacher quality, standards, and training programs. State responsibilities included: (a) allocating resources, (b) approving providers for professional development, and (c) requiring evaluations. The district and school responsibilities included adopting state standards and managing federal and state requirements for evaluating professional development. Teachers will continue to face many challenges including: (a) aligning practice in the field with research and policy, (b) accessing online information and activities, (c) pursuing National Board Certification, and (d) attending conferences and curriculum planning while working collaboratively.

States have recognized the need for emphasis on staff development as a way to improve growth and skill development in teachers. The State of New Jersey Department of Education website (2006) states, “Sometimes called staff development, professional development is the term to describe a variety of opportunities to continually learn, update and improve the knowledge and skills of any professional” (para 3). The Kentucky Department of Education website (2009) defined professional development as a long-term, systematic practice of providing educators with the knowledge, skills, and ability which will help them successfully obtain personal, professional and organizational goals, and ultimately improve the education of their students.

The Louisiana Department of Education website (2008) stated that the National Staff Development Council standards are divided into three categories: (a) context/resource, (b) process/collaboration, and (c) content. These standards are guided by three questions:

1. What are all students expected to know and be able to do?
2. What must teachers know and do in order to ensure student success?
3. Where must staff development focus to meet both goals?

The first category, context and resource, clarified the concept that students' learning improves when adults working with these students are provided staff development improving their teaching skills. The next category, process and collaboration, suggested that educators needed to be equipped with collaboration skills and knowledge to improve their ability and increase the learning of students. Content, the third category, suggested that staff development should prepare educators to hold students to high academic expectations in a safe, orderly, and supportive learning environment (Louisiana Department of Education, 2008).

Collaboration

Richardson (1994) indicated that teachers' professional training should focus on engaging teachers in collaborative groups. Within a school district an administrator may employ groups that have varying levels of skill development including: (a) ability to unify group's goals, (b) forming relationships, (c) establishing group rules, and (d) deciding which tasks will be most effective in order to meet the needs and interpersonal expectations of the participants (Chance & Segura, 2009). Panitz (1996) described the collaboration process as one of empowerment coming from interaction with others. He suggested that collaborative groups draw upon the individual abilities of group members and also build group skills such as sharing responsibilities, tasks, and coming to a consensus rather than competing. Starr (2009) stated, "Collaboration is a general term that has become synonymous with working together to address a common goal" (p. 2).

Brufee (1993) suggested cooperative learning stressed traditional knowledge, while collaboration was a part of social constructivism that asserted that both knowledge and authority of knowledge have changed dramatically in the last century. This resulted in transitioning from the understanding of knowledge as a cognitive construct to the application of knowledge as a

social construct and process. A collaborative project model explains how an individual functions in an interdependent world.

Bellah, Madison, Sullivan, Swinder, and Tipton in their book *Habits of the Heart* (1985) presented a narrative of the tension we experienced in the United States between a pervasive philosophy of the individual and a desire to be part of a community. The collaborative group process is a paradigm of teaching and learning that has its roots in constructivism, a philosophy in which individuals or groups shape and construct their realizations and learning through their experiences. Windle and Warren (2009) suggested using Fisher and Ury's model of collaborative problem solving. Fisher and Ury's model in their book *Getting to Yes* (1991) involves individuals working together to problem solve rather than working individually at polar positions. A common theme through these models is the use of group collaboration, interdependence for solving problems in the educational or social community, rather than individual independent problem solving.

Additional areas to consider in designing collaborative groups are the size, number of activities to be accomplished, guidelines, and benefits. Kirk and Walter (1981) maintained that five to eight members is an ideal size, allowing for involvement of all members and eliminating the possibility of members withdrawing or becoming dissatisfied with the group. Collaborative groups or *topical* groups were defined by Kirk and Walter as those mainly concerned with a specific topic. Teachers of the same grade, which include members with similar interest, were defined as *membership* groups. Their research recommended that too much homogeneity in a group may decrease the depth and overall range of the discussion of ideas. As suggested in the work of Kirk and Walter it might be more significant to incorporate both criteria by bringing

together educational personnel with similar interests and tasks within the organization with a broad interpersonal base that lends itself to a variety of topic interactions.

Oliphant (1990) suggested that the developmental stages of a collaborative group require much thought and review of research. A large group may inhibit members from participation and decrease personal interaction but can allow for creation of more group ideas, whereas a small group may provide more opportunities for flexibility, participation, and group cohesion. Oliphant also suggested possible guidelines for the collaborative group development: (a) making a serious commitment to the group, (b) giving all members specific tasks, (c) putting all suggestions in writing, and (d) not forgetting to have fun. A sense of a common cause and a growing appreciation for others' knowledge and expertise provide teachers with a sense of community that can be a resulting benefit of collaboration.

Fisher and Ury (1991) compared collaboration to people working together side by side to solve problems rather than negotiating from opposing positions. Hargreaves (1992) stated, "The most educationally significant aspects of teachers' lives and work are the relationships between teachers and their colleagues" (p. 221). A process of two-way thinking where communication is dialogue and thinking is made public was Tinzmann, Jones, Fennimore, Bakker, Fine, and Pierce (1990) definition of collaboration.

Collaboration as a means of professional development is a paradigm shift in learning. Schools have found it difficult to implement a team teaching process, an atmosphere that fosters collaboration and caring (Skrtic, 1991). Skrtic suggested that schools find it hard to deviate from standardization in their products and services.

Facilitator and Collaborative Culture

Group structure may vary, but a facilitator as a leader appears to be a key component in development and task assignment. Panitz (1996) suggested that the instructor, or in collaborative culture the facilitator, establishes and assigns tasks and then transfers to the group the authority for achievement of the task. A facilitator who believes in the collaborative process and strives to foster an environment to influence change is leading by example.

Glazer and Abbott (2000) listed the characteristics for a collaborative group facilitator: (a) trustworthy, (b) empathetic, (c) experienced as a teacher, (d) trained as a facilitator of collaborative groups, and (e) dedicated to participants' reflection. Facilitators who model these qualities of a good collaborator strengthen the collaborative process. Glazer and Abbott stated, "The facilitator must maintain an attitude of serving not leading or redirecting the group" (p. 1).

Benefits of Collaboration on Professional Development

Starr (2009) suggested that two major components in development of collaborative environments were equal relationships among all involved and an individual's commitment to engage in dialogue and mutual inquiry. Equal relationships among individuals allowed for risk-taking in the slow process toward building collaboration. On a collaborative work team individuals prefer working with people who have positive attitudes even if they are inexperienced rather than working with highly experienced individuals who lack passion, honesty, or dedication. Researchers suggested teachers who previously worked in isolation favored programs that allowed collaboration with colleagues (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Hiebert, Gallimore & Stigler, 2002). Starr stated that the benefits achieved from collaboration include need for mutual support, expertise, and experience and combination of strengths. Beneficial activities that might occur in a collaborative group include: (a) bringing in

speakers to discuss a specific topic, (b) writing letters to administrators and policy makers, (c) organizing local workshops or conferences, (d) developing materials as a collaborative effort, (e) individual teachers investigating topics in their field and leading group discussions, and (f) creating a handbook and a mini-library for group members to use.

Gould (2008) suggested that because teachers often work without adult interaction, much can be gained when teachers collaborate with colleagues. Teachers realize they are not alone and may tackle projects and ideas through collaborative experiences. There is often strength in numbers and the willingness to try and explore new ideas. Hilliard (1991) explained:

Just as there is vast untapped potential, yes genius among the children, there is also vast untapped potential among the teachers who serve the children. Teachers need their own intellectual and emotional hunger to be fed. Teachers need to experience the joy of collaboration, discussion, dialogue, critique, and research (p. 60).

Effect of Quality Teachers on Student Learning

The Public Education Network and The Finance Project (2005) suggested that highly effective teachers produce high-achieving students. Demonstrating that professional development has an effect on student learning is difficult. There are many variables that have an effect on student achievement from student and teacher characteristics, to changes in school curriculum and environment, and circumstances at home. One format of professional development described in The Public Education Network and The Finance Project included mentoring programs for teachers during the early stages of their careers. After the first 5 years, professional development activities lacked the intensity of the initial mentoring process, being fewer in number and less effective in content. This publication also suggested that in the first 5 years of a teacher's career, student achievement had a direct correlation with lack of experience.

A teacher's effectiveness in the classroom and a strong correlation with student achievement was indicated by Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, and Birman (2002) in their research. Villarreal (2005) noted a challenge for professional development was to strengthen teachers' self-efficacy by developing a teacher's understanding of how students learn and thereby developing teaching that strongly correlates with students' success.

Villarreal (2005) proposed a professional development paradigm for increasing effective instructional decision making. The paradigm included: (a) a sense of self-efficacy from teachers' knowledge about students as learners, (b) communication, (c) curriculum and instructional skills, and (d) effective reflective strategies and problem solving skills. Hiebert, Gallimore, and Stigler (2002) suggested increasing a teacher's knowledge base through professional development to improve teaching practices that ultimately improves student achievement. Numerous researchers (Fullan, 1987; Gould, 2008; Kirk, 1981; & Wong, 2002) in the field of education have commented on the importance of effective professional development for teachers to increase student learning. It was noted by McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership (2005) that school administrators acknowledged the relationship between professional development and an increase in quality of programs and learning outcomes for children.

According to Darling-Hammond's (1999) review of The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future the greatest benefit and usage of education dollars in the United States was invested in improving the knowledge and skills of teachers. Resnick (2005) suggested that there is a strong relationship between the levels of student achievement and professional development of teachers, which should be considered when the goal is to increase student learning and performance. Fullan and Steigelbauer's (1991) research showed school

improvement and academic growth of students increased when educators and administrators continually expanded their knowledge and capabilities.

Key Components of Professional Growth

Jakes (2009) described four areas that applied to staff development and effective professional growth for teachers. The first area, understanding the purpose of professional growth, suggested altering professional behavior and thereby improving student performance. This is accomplished through training personnel and providing skills resulting in alternate and improved teaching techniques, ultimately leading to improved student learning. Aligning professional development with school district goals is the second area. Jakes stated that if teachers have professional growth opportunities that reflect their needs learning will take place as a result of motivation and the informal nature of the opportunities. The third area involves the need for educators to be knowledgeable of current research and understand approaches that include best practices in order to meet their students' learning needs. The last area, engagement in a pilot program, emphasized the importance of teachers practicing new skills within the classroom setting.

The McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership (2005) in its review of 27 studies on professional development explained that educators need to consider formal professional development activities that include knowledge from general education and specific academic content areas. Fullan's (1987) research suggested that for teacher staff development to be effective four crucial factors need to be in place. The first factor includes redefining the definition to include staff development as a learning process. Leadership at the school level that is the second factor is a critical component for success. The third factor requires that the teacher has an understanding the organizational culture of the school. The last factor emphasizes that the

roles local and regional agencies play are essential for success. Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1989) organized effective staff development into five models: (a) individually guided staff development, (b) observation and assessment, (c) involvement in a development and improvement process, (d) training, and (e) inquiry.

High quality professional development is defined as that which meets the criteria contained in the definition of professional development in Title IX , Section 9101 (34) of the Education and Secondary Education Act (National Association of Special Education Teachers : Professional Development, 2009). According to this act professional development should include but not be limited to: (a) activities that improve and increase teachers' knowledge of academic subjects; (b) enabling teachers to be highly qualified; (c) being an integral part of broad school wide and district wide educational improvement plans; (d) giving teachers and principals the knowledge and skills to help students meet challenging state academic standards; (e) improving classroom management skills; (f) providing sustained, intensive , and classroom-focused workshops that are not 1-day or short-term; and (g) advancing teacher understanding of effective instruction strategies that are based on scientifically based research, developed with extensive participation of teachers, principals, parents, and administrators.

Little (1993) commented that one key component of professional development is the ability to prepare teachers individually and collaboratively to act as shapers, promoters, and well-informed critics of reform. According to Desimone's et al. (2002) research of the Eisenhower Professional Development Program, there are six key features of high quality professional development that lead to increased teacher self-reported knowledge, skills, and changes in teacher practices. These are identified as: (a) reform type, (b) duration, (c) collective participation, (d) active learning, (e) coherence, and (f) content focus. These six features are

separated into two subgroups. The first three features are structural in nature while the last three are core features.

The Public Education Network and The Finance Project (2005) described seven characteristics that are important for quality professional development. The first characteristic of professional development is that it must be continuous and ongoing. The practice of attendance at a single seminar or presentation does not align with this characteristic. Increasing students' learning, the second characteristic, focuses on improving classroom practices through collaborative professional development. Classroom practices, the third characteristic, must focus on the areas of achievement needed by students in order to have successful outcomes. Students' needs must be well-established and considered daily in teaching. The fourth characteristic of quality professional development, developing appropriate curriculum, is an ongoing process that should include skill areas necessary to be successful. The fifth characteristic, providing critical teaching and fostering critically reflective teachers in the school culture, is an area where teachers share knowledge and experiences about students' improvement and then progress toward meeting those objectives. Modeling and coaching problem solving skills by teachers, the sixth characteristic, are necessary components of effective lesson planning. Investigation of practices through case study analysis and professional discourse is the seventh characteristic.

Gould (2008) stated that to create successful change in education and impact student learning, four factors for professional development should be included: (a) topics for staff development must be relevant and engaging to teachers, (b) teachers have to be the ones that generate the staff development, (c) change must be able to occur through the school, and (d) administration must support the staff development. Characteristics of quality staff development

for teachers have continued to be a vital component of national and state reform efforts in the field of public education (Rose & Gallup, 1999).

Effects of Professional Growth and Collaboration on Teacher Retention

Breud (2001) noted there are a variety of ways to provide teachers with opportunities to share ideas and information with colleagues and others in similar professions as a way to retain teachers. Eighty-five percent of teacher respondents polled favored the use of professional training through the school site as an incentive for attracting and retaining good teachers (Rose & Gallop, 1999). Eaker and Keating (2008) stated educators are leaving the profession, and the answer is not finding more teachers but rather keeping good teachers. Retention of good teachers, while at the same time improving schools led to the development of professional learning communities or collaborative cultures. This resulted in higher levels of learning for both students and teachers (Eaker &Keating, 2008).

In a study of American, German, and Japanese education practices, Harrison (2004) identified the isolation and lack of purposeful professional dialogue as the key differences between American and Japanese teaching cultures. It was suggested by the researcher that Japanese teachers generally carried out their work in rich, trust-based collaborative learning environments called *Lesson Study* that are different from the manner in which American teaching cultures operate. Teachers who actively collaborate in a learning community and influence the decision making process are more likely to stay in the profession.

Professional Growth and Collaboration Relating to Teachers as Lifelong Learners

What approaches, experiences, and resources foster lifelong learning? Lifelong learning is another benefit of professional development. Fenwick (2001) defined the phrase *lifelong learning* as a broader definition of professional development. Fullan and Steigelbauer (1991)

expanded the definition of professional development to include: “The sum total of formal and informal learning experiences throughout one’s career from pre-service teacher education to retirement” (p. 326). The concept and attitudes towards professional development for teachers have been influenced by two trends. These trends are professional development as a continuum of lifelong learning and focusing on community learning rather than individual teachers (Davis & Sumara, 2001; Fenwick, 2001).

Huberman (1989) identified five stages in a teacher’s professional life. The first stage, career entry, was described as between 1 to 3 years in the teaching profession. This stage was suggested as often a time in the teacher’s professional life for survival and discovery. Stabilization, from 4 to 6 years, was the second stage and a time when teachers achieve a sense of instructional mastery and commitment to teaching as a career. The third stage, divergent period, from 7 to 18 years was expressed as a time of experimentation for some teachers and a stage in which others’ level of frustration peaks and leaves the profession. The fourth stage, or the second divergent period, was suggested as a time when some teachers experience self-assessment and relaxation while others criticize all aspects of the profession. This period usually occurs within 19 to 30 years in the teacher’s career. The last stage, gradual separation and disengagement, occurs from 31 to 50 years of experience and was described as a time for reflection.

Fullan and Steigelbauer (1991) expanded the definition of professional development to include, “the sum total of formal and informal learning experiences throughout one’s career from pre-service teacher education to retirement” (p.326). Fenwick (2001) suggested that lifelong learning is not rooted in any particular moral or professional commitment but rather consists of a broader range of definitions. Villegas-Reimer’s (2003) international review of literature

supported the concept that a teacher's professional development is a lifelong process. Sykes (1996) suggested that improving the educational process for students must begin with continuous learning on the part of the teacher. Furthermore, Sykes linked being a great teacher with being a lifelong learner, ultimately translating into a positive effect on student achievement.

Dialogic Leadership

Isaacs (1999) termed dialogic leadership as exposing through conversation the unknown creative capability of an individual. He stated that dialogic leadership is an approach that can appear at any level of an organization and is vital for organization effectiveness. Members in an organization who apply this approach learn to think together and build successful relationships. He described the dialogic leader approach as including four qualities. These qualities are: (a) to hear what individuals are truly saying, (b) to use good listening skills, (c) to respects others' viewpoints, and (d) to be willing to change their original point of view. When a leader embodies all four of these qualities and can elicit them in others the leader is considered balanced as a leader.

Glover (2007) experienced the power of dialogue as a new principal in a K-6 elementary school. After trying to lead his faculty and experiencing frustration, he discovered Isaacs's set of practices on dialogic leadership. When Glover changed his leadership approach, it transformed his own leadership. By becoming a dialogic leader, Glover was able to respect teachers' views as legitimate and came to view his role as a principal in a different light. This approach allows individuals to learn to use their differences to develop united perceptions.

Isaacs (1999) identified David Kantor's Four-Player Model as actions or stances from which an individual may approach a conversation. These four actions or stances are: *move*, *follow*, *oppose*, and *bystand*. No one of these is preferred over another and a dialogic leader will

try and look for a balance in individual interactions. The role of a leader is to pay attention to the action that is missing and then provide it themselves or encourage that action in others.

The first action, *move*, suggested that an individual will initiate ideas and directions. Those that do what they are told while supporting the cause and helping others are involved in the second action that is to *follow*. The third action, *oppose*, is carried out by an individual who challenges or questions the legitimacy of the actions. The last action from which an individual may approach a conversation is in the role of *bystander*. A *bystander* knows what is happening and provides perspectives.

Palmer (1993) suggested that we need ground rules established to keep from ending the conversation with teachers before it starts in order to achieve more creative outcomes. He described ground rules as being similar to *rules of engagement* practiced by the military. When eliciting information from a person in this experience, it should be in the form of honest and open questions, refraining from arguing and making points. Palmer shared that in his experience using this approach of dialogue individuals have conveyed a rare sense of community with each other. The person being questioned, Palmer suggested, is also provided with new insight into themselves and the ability to see possible problems as well as opportunities.

Summary

According to the literature there is an agreement that staff development is needed to increase the skill level of individuals. The history of staff development has evolved over the years to include many components that were not previously considered important. The key components of the staff development models researched have similar factors, especially in the area of developing skills. Researchers agreed that effective staff development has an effect on students' learning. In the area of teacher retention it was suggested that a strong staff

development program is viewed positively by teachers. The literature revealed teachers should be viewed as lifelong learners who experience professional growth as a continuous process that begins in preservice and ends with retirement. One way to insure effective professional development is the collaborative team where individuals work together.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This research was a qualitative case study of how special education personnel perceive their professional growth and skill development as a result of participation on a collaborative team. My examination of this process was the purpose of this study. This study took place within the Roane County Schools Special Education Department in Roane County, Tennessee. Data were collected via a focus group consisting of eight participants using a semistructured guide. Independent interviewers conducted individual interviews of participants using a semistructured guide. Internal documents relating to the Research and Development Team for 2004-2008 were reviewed. This chapter describes the methods and procedures that were used in the research with a description of the research questions, data collection, interviews, ethical protocol, document review, data analysis, quality and verification, and summary.

Research Questions

The following research questions provided the focus for this qualitative case study as I examined the participation of special education personnel on the Research and Development Team.

1. How do special education team members define professional growth and skill development as a result of collaborative participation?
2. What do special education team members perceive as benefits of being a member of this team compared to my perceptions?
3. What have special education team members learned from participation on the team?
4. How do special education team members' perceptions of their professional growth differ from my perceptions and how they are similar?

Data Collection

This study was designed as a qualitative case study. The qualitative method was selected to allow the team members to orally state their perceptions concerning their professional growth and skill development. As the originator of the Research and Development Team, I had personal experience and knowledge of the collaborative team and a perception of the professional growth of the team members. This prior experience with the collaborative team allowed me to understand and be connected to the phenomena being studied while also making decisions on the method used in the study. Through the use of qualitative processes of research I interpreted the data collected in interviews using Glaser and Strauss's steps in the Constant Comparison Analysis Method to establish validity in a descriptive manner (Merriam, 1998).

A good case study should use as many sources as possible of data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). The six sources of data collection most often used in case studies that they suggested are: (a) documentation, (b) archival records, (c) interviews, (d) direct observation, (e) participant-observation, and (f) physical artifacts. These six sources have comparative strengths and weaknesses with no single source having complete advantage over the other. Yin (1989) concurred with Marshall's and Rossman's recommendation of the array of data collection that is necessary to build an in-depth picture of a case study.

This research included two of the six sources of data collection recommended by Marshall and Rossman (1989). The two sources that were used in this research are both individual and focus group interviews and archival records. Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1990), suggested that the focus group interview follow a specific set of questions. The stream of questions in a personal interview should be fluid rather than rigid (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) and

explained that fluid questioning occurs when the interviewer follows a line of inquiry and asks questions in an unbiased manner.

I reviewed records using a document guide for consistency in recording the data of reoccurring themes and patterns. Newsletter articles, summer team agendas, facilitator's reports, and notebooks were included in my review. In addition, a review of the documents and materials generated by the team were reviewed.

Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) suggested that validity of data collection in research can be achieved through a chain of evidence or the ability for the researcher to establish "meaningful links between the research questions, raw data, and findings" (p. 577). An important element of validity is referred to as triangulation. Research triangulation is "the use of more than one approach to the investigation of a research question in order to enhance confidence in the ensuing findings" (Bryman, 2009, p. 1). Three types of triangulation were included: (a) I conducted the focus group interview, (b) two independent interviewers conducted the personal interviews, and (c) I collected information from multiple sources of archival records to collaborate facts.

Interviews

Purposeful Sample

Miles and Huberman (1994) compiled a typology of sampling strategies in qualitative inquiry, one being purposeful sampling. They suggested purposeful sampling is useful for quality assurance where all cases meet some criterion. Special education personnel who met the criterion population framework have been employed in the school system as special education personnel and have participated on the Research and Development Team from 1 to 5 years.

Payroll timecards completed by personnel indicated there were 34 total personnel over the last 5 years. Fifteen personnel of the original team of 25 have returned every year. Four personnel have participated for 4 years and four others have participated for three years, making a total of 23 personnel who have returned for a minimum of 3 of the 5 years. Eleven other personnel have participated 1 to 2 years on the team. Twenty-five of the 34 total personnel meet the purposeful criterion population framework. Nine of the 34 personnel did not meet the purposeful population criteria for the 2009-2010 school year because four had retired, four had left the system, and one had moved to a regular education position.

The personnel who meet the purposeful population were contacted during the 2009-2010 school year requesting their participation in the research. An introductory meeting was scheduled with personnel who met purposeful population criteria and had the required history of participation. I considered a participation rate of 50 % as a sufficient number to conduct the research.

I selected eight participants for the focus group. I purposefully selected a wide range of roles within the Special Education Department to make certain that subgroups within the department were represented. The subgroups included classroom teachers and system-wide personnel to allow for different viewpoints.

Recruiting Protocol

Twenty-five personnel met the purposeful criterion population framework. These personnel are directly supervised by principals at their home school and not by me. I contacted personnel by email during the 2009-2010 school year to request participation. The email included East Tennessee State as the university I am attending, title of the dissertation, my intent of the research, a brief explanation of the interview processes, and a description of the research.

Personnel were requested to respond to the email within 5 school days (Appendix A). The personnel who agreed to participate received a second email requesting attendance at an introductory session with me and the two independent interviewers (Appendix B). The purpose of the introductory session was for me to explain the purpose of the study, duration of the study, and review procedures. At the end of the introductory session, those who still agreed to participate were asked to sign the informed consent protocol. This protocol included the intended use of the data, duration of the study, procedures, and minimal risk during the study for the participants (Appendix C).

Interview Guides

Although I was unable to distinguish individually what was intrusive for each participant, careful consideration of this possibility influenced the design of the interview guides for the focus group and personal interviews. My knowledge base and review of literature pertaining to professional development and collaborative process were also considered in development and construction of personal and focus group interview guides.

The interview process was selected because I had prior knowledge of the professional growth that team members received. The interview process allowed me to obtain a comprehensive description of each participant's perception of his or her professional growth and skill development. The interview guides consisted of open-ended, predetermined, formatted questions. The purpose of a formatted question guide was structuring the interview process for consistency of data collection and in-depth discussion (Merriam, 1998). Both interview guides (Appendixes D & E) addressed changes in: (a) increased expertise and use of technology, (b) exhibited collaborative skills and improved interpersonal relationships, (c) developed increased understanding of curriculum, (d) presented evidence of increased job satisfaction, (e)

demonstrated analytical abilities, and (f) illustrated enhancement in professional and creative expression.

Interview Logistics

I selected eight participants in order to have variability in the focus group session. The first step in the focus group process was to ask the participants if they had any questions. After answering questions the participants had about participation in the study, I proceeded with open-ended, predetermined, formatted questions. The focus group session was audio taped for provision of maximum interaction by me during the focus session. Unlike the personal interviews, the participants in the focus group were not guaranteed confidentiality. The focus group session concluded with me summarizing the participants' statements followed by corrections if needed. Focus group participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. At the conclusion of the focus group session, I was free to pursue further inquiry into areas participants initiated during the group process (Appendix D). The option to return at a future date to ask questions was addressed in the informed consent (Appendix C).

In addition to the focus group, personal interviews were conducted using interviewers independent of me to help provide research validity. Interviewers for personal interviews had completed Instructional Review Board (IRB) certification. These interviewers had no supervisory responsibilities and were not employed in the school system. Initial selection as interviewers included experiences as educators and personal characteristics of excellent verbal and interpersonal skills.

Participants were scheduled for personal semistructured interviews during the 2009-2010 school year. Steps in the personal interview process included asking the participant if they had questions prior to proceeding with the interview and audio-taping. The independent interviewers

used open-ended, predetermined, formatted questions developed by me, and information was kept confidential (Appendix A). Interviews were conducted in the conference room at the school where each participant was employed allowing for privacy during the sessions. Interviewers were free to inquire into questions participants initiated. The conclusion of the interview consisted of a brief summary by the interviewer of the participant's statements followed by corrections if needed. There were no participants who did not follow through with the interview process.

Participants' names were used during the focus group and personal interviews and then assigned a pseudonym during the transcription process. Because I was not the transcriber, the information from the individual interviews was not identifiable by me, and participants' names were not included in the research. This method of confidentiality helped to protect the privacy of the participants in the research.

In addition, an Institutional Review Board certified individual served as an editor to ensure against bias in interviewing and data collection to enhance credibility within the study. This individual employed in the education field had not participated on the Research and Development Team and was not an employee in the school system where the research was conducted.

Ethical Protocol

I contacted the Director of Schools to request written permission to conduct the research. An application including a letter of permission from the central office administrator to conduct the research was filed at The Institutional Review Board Office at East Tennessee State University. Ethical consideration for reviewing documents was maintained during the process.

Document Review

The purpose of the questions developed for the document review was to establish consistency, reoccurring themes, and patterns in the research. I reviewed documents related to the Research and Development Team using a document guide for consistency in recording data of reoccurring themes and patterns. Reports on the team's progress for the summers of 2004 and 2005, notebooks for years 2006-2008, newsletters, and summer task lists were included in the reviews. The documents were reviewed, as suggested by Merriam (1998), to check for: (a) previous years' growth (b) added or confirmed to the information gained in the focus group session and personal interviews, and (c) provided additional information concerning themes and patterns and the use of the collaborative process (Appendix F).

Data Analysis

Interviews

The focus group session was transcribed and reviewed by me. This review provided the opportunity to clearly understand the intent of the participants and identify if there was a need for additional interviews. Participants were also given a copy of their transcribed interview to review during the draft stages of the research. Member checking, an additional source for accuracy and completeness, allowed the participants to check their statements (Merriam, 1998). Through this process of member checking, participants were able to recall additional facts, errors, or the need for me to collect additional data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I coded interviews for reoccurring themes and patterns using the Constant Comparison Analysis Methods in order to compare with other passages previously coded. This allowed for systematic and consistent comparisons. This method of data analysis allowed me to note particular themes that emerge from the focus group and personal interviews (Merriam, 1998).

Document Review

I reviewed documents related to the Research and Development Team using a document guide for consistency in recording themes and patterns. I identified evidence relating to: (a) previous years' growth and the use of the collaborative process, (b) added to the information gained in the focus group session and personal interviews, and (c) provided additional information concerning themes and patterns (Appendix F).

Quality and Verify

Validity and Reliability

Triangulation, the process of using multiple data collection methods, sources and analysis, was a method to address internal validity (Merriam, 1998). There were four types of research triangulation: (a) data sources, (b) different investigators, (c) perspectives to the same data, and (d) methods. Merriam also suggested that triangulation can help eliminate biases by not relying entirely on one source. Findings in a case study are likely to be much more convincing and accurate if they are based on several different sources of information (Patton, 1980). Three types of investigator triangulation were included in my study: (a) I conducted the focus group interview, (b) two independent interviewers conducted the personal interviews, and (c) I collected information from multiple sources of archival records to collaborate facts.

A variety of data techniques were used in reporting the results, incorporating the theoretical framework, quotes from data, and narrative reporting. A peer examiner who had not participated on the team reviewed dialogue for biases, kept my personal experiences with the team from influencing data, and helped in ensuring credibility. In a qualitative study validity can be obtained by avoidance of leading questions, unconscious nonverbal affirmations and using an objective person to do the interviews. I had to constantly switch back and forth between their

perceptions and what is actually going on in the world. A vital component of valid research is that the results received are the same as the original data. Validity in qualitative research is achieved through careful and accurate descriptions of the researcher's interpretation of the findings. McMillian and Schumacher (2006) asked this question when discussing validity, "Do researchers observe what they think they see?" (p. 324). Merriam (1998) suggested internal validity or reliability is the way in which the research findings capture what is really in the research and data that match the theory of the research.

In addition to the focus group personal interviews were conducted by interviewers independent of me to help provide research validity of findings. Participants were scheduled for personal semistructured interviews during the 2009-2010 school year. The findings of this study were limited to special education personnel in Roane County Schools in Tennessee; therefore, results might not be generalized to other special education personnel populations.

Finally, confidence in validity of the research was established through several approaches. These methods are: (a) using accurate data collection such as open ended questions that did not presuppose answers, (b) using independent interviewers, (c) using a peer examiner, (d) using sound data analysis through personal interviews and focus groups formats, and (e) interpretation of data based on actual answers with acknowledgement of personal bias.

Researcher's Perceptions

Although the original purpose of the Research and Development Team was to generate products that could be used in the special education department, it became apparent that there were additional unexpected benefits that resulted from participation in the collaboration process. I perceived that team participants have developed and increased: (a) increased expertise and use of technology, (b) exhibited collaborative skills and improved interpersonal relationships, (c)

developed increased understanding of curriculum, (d) presented evidence of increased job satisfaction, (e) demonstrated analytical abilities, and (f) illustrated enhancement in professional and creative expression. Each of these perceptions is discussed in this section of the research.

The summer of 2004 was the first year of the Research and Development Team. It was clear from my observations and discussions with the facilitator that personnel exhibited a lack of computer skills. At the end of the summer the facilitator indicated that one special education personnel had never turned on a computer and many personnel lacked word processing skills and the ability to use the internet. Only two personnel exhibited confidence and knowledge in computer use. Therefore, the first 2 years the facilitator and another personnel provided technology training to personnel on basic computer skills such as printing, generating, and saving documents and effective use of the internet. Based on my perceptions, the difficulty of technology use impacted the success of the team. During the 3rd year of participation the school district changed from an Apple to a Microsoft platform requiring new skill development. The facilitator provided training on Microsoft Word skills. The team members' expanding computer skills led to more advanced applications such as making table and graphs and using Microsoft Publisher. I have perceived that most of the personnel on the team currently function at an independent skill level when using technology. I have observed that personnel have incorporated the skills they developed during the summer sessions into their daily jobs and are now less hesitant to try new tasks that involve the use of computer technology. As a result I perceived that the personnel on the team have increased their technology expertise and use.

Prior to the 2004 summer sessions there had been very few opportunities for district wide use of collaborative skills and the development of interpersonal relationships. My personal observations of the teams from 2004 to 2008 indicated to me an increase in the development of

these two areas. First, team personnel learned to work as a group. They developed problem solving skills such as prioritizing ideas to be discussed during the sessions, listening to each other objectively, and learning to use the strengths of others. The team also developed a process for consensus in decision-making thereby preventing conflict and enhancing the progress of the team toward their goals. Interpersonal relationships were developed and continued after the team sessions ended for the summer. Because the team was comprised of personnel with different roles, they developed an understanding of teamwork through shared responsibilities and bringing their own unique talents and skills together to reach a common goal.

Alignment of the curriculum was the team's first task in the summer of 2004. The team aligned Tennessee State Standards with the district special education curriculum. When the team wrote goals and objectives for the special education department based on state standards and communicated these to schools within the district, I perceived that this resulted in the expansion of their knowledge and understanding of curriculum. Curriculum understanding and application was further developed in summer session 2005 as the team reviewed and evaluated curriculum materials from various publishers. This review resulted in the choice of materials to be used by special educators in Roane County Schools.

I believe that job satisfaction, an important component in the special education work setting, increases performance, participation, creativity, appreciation for others, and a greater interest in the special education department. Twenty-three of the 34 Research and Development Team personnel remained on the team 3 of the 5 years. I sense that creativity by the team personnel improved through the additional ideas and projects that the personnel generated. As I observed the personnel on the team I noticed that verbal praise and interaction among them provided positive reinforcement and appreciation. I also observed a greater interest and

participation in book studies and unsolicited suggestions for improvement within the department as a result of the Research and Development Team. Review of documents from the summer of 2008 indicated that the team generated the list of books to be studied for the following school year. In addition the documents indicated that the team researched books on a variety of topics specifically beneficial to other special educators. These books were purchased and were the beginnings of a professional library for the special education teachers.

Another important area of skill development for the Research and Development Team participants was improved analytical abilities. It is important for special education personnel to analyze individual students' strengths and weaknesses to provide a program of effective instruction. Because personnel on the team had been trained during summer sessions, data analysis has become a focus of the special education department district wide. I perceive that special educators throughout the county have a new understanding of data collection and its application to classroom success. Student goals and objectives are written annually using the data available. Individual student data folders and system special education referral trends data sheets were developed as a result of summer sessions. Student data folders are maintained on each special education student and contain relevant assessment information and individual student-generated goals. This information is used for planning instruction and documentation of proficiency on the Individual Education Plan. Psychologists within the system collect information on all students referred for special education testing in order to analyze patterns of referral and system trends. I have observed special education personnel exhibiting knowledge in using data to evaluate student progress as a result of participation on the team.

Professional and creative expression has been observed in the finished products of the team. Team participants' ideas resulted in products I did not expect to be developed. These have

included projects such as special education procedural manual, parent disability brochures and booklets, data collection sheets, special education forms and notebooks, beginning teachers' manual for modifications and accommodations, and articles for the special education newsletter. Personnel on the team have shown creativity in the layout and the language in the materials that reflected an educator's point of view. Products developed by smaller groups within the team indicated a shared vision and each product showed diversity based on individual group perspectives.

The team has challenged me on several issues and has had ideas that have become procedures within the special education department. One area is the way in which the task list for the summer session is generated. I developed the 2004 summer task list but this has now evolved into the personnel on the team and facilitator developing the list of proposed tasks. This task list is now constantly added to throughout the year by the personnel on the team. As a result of this change, the task list for the summer session is now developed by personnel on the team rather than me. This has resulted in sessions being devoted to generating products to incorporating new skill development for the team personnel. The facilitator's role has also evolved into a trainer of new skills rather than a monitor of task completion. Some procedures within the special education department that are the result of the team initiatives are: (a) data folders for each student, (b) consistency in county wide assessment materials, (c) adoption of special education reading program, (d) annual training for paraprofessionals within the special education department, (e) special education procedural manual, (f) update and development of the special education website, and (g) an annual book study within the department.

Additionally, it seems logical that a supervisory position has some built-in limits to its perceptions of relationships and issues that might be attributed to the personality characteristics

of the supervisor, nature of the relationship between supervisor and supervisees, and organizational framework and culture within which participants work. This study may also help to enlighten me regarding any such issues. Expanding my understanding of the nature of our organization's relationships and culture should help to improve my work and the work of personnel on the team and was one of the goals of this project.

In conclusion it is clear to me that the products that have been created by team personnel are benefits of the collaborative team process. In the long term having a group of professionals within the department who have skills and attitudes resulting from the team process benefits the special education department. This study assessed the accuracy of my perceptions regarding the growth of personnel on the team.

Summary

This chapter included a description of the methods and procedures used in conducting this case study research including the research questions, data collection, interviews, ethical protocol, document review, data analysis, quality and verification, and summary. The purpose of this research design was the examination of the perceived growth and skill development of personnel as members of a collaborative team. Data were collected from personnel who agreed to participate in the research, had participated on the Research and Development Team over the last 5 years and met the purposeful sampling criteria. This study was limited to special education personnel in Roane County Tennessee

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine perceptions of special education personnel and my perceptions concerning the professional growth and skill development of participants on a collaborative team in Roane County, Tennessee. Participants' perceptions were analyzed and should provide administrators with findings to use in planning for professional growth and skill development.

Research Questions

Research Question #1.

How do special education team members define professional growth and skill development as a result of collaborative participation?

Research Question #2.

What do special education team members perceive as benefits of being a member of this team compared to my perceptions?

Research Question #3.

What have special education team members learned from participation on the team?

Research Question #4.

How do special education team members' perceptions of their professional growth differ from mine and how they are similar?

Interviewers' Training, Selections of Participants, and Data Collection Analysis

Although using interviews in qualitative research was time-consuming and resource intensive, this form of data collection is a more personal method of gathering data than questionnaires. Kvale (1996) identified the main task of qualitative research interviews as being

able to understand and describe central themes in the life of the interviewee as they relate to the research topic. According to Kvale interviews that cover the factual level are usually not as difficult to conduct as compared to interviews that cover the implication level.

In the interview process data collected by the interviewer are considered a part of the measurement instrument. Training for interviewers on conducting interviews and accurately collect data is crucial. Interviewers were selected based on their familiarity with educational settings and their communication and interpersonal skills. Interviewers first completed the required Institutional Review Board (IRB) certification. Next, training was scheduled with me on guidelines by Boyce and Neale (2006) for conducting interviews. Training began with an introduction to the research objectives. For the interviewers understanding of research objectives gave a purpose behind data collection and the logic of the sampling of participants. A review of data collection techniques suggested by Boyce and Neale included: (a) the importance of listening to the participant, (b) periodically checking the tape recorder, (c) keeping the interviewee focused on the intended questions, (d) taking notes, and (e) recording nonverbal actions. It was important during training that interviewers understood the importance of showing interest in what participants were saying, making them comfortable during the interview, avoiding yes and no questions, using appropriate body language, and not expressing personal opinions. Awareness of how the interviewers could bias and put at risk results of the data collection was emphasized. Lastly, a rehearsal of the interviewing process was conducted prior to beginning formal interviews. Rehearsal interviewing allowed me the opportunity for retraining of the interviewers when necessary and gave interviewers the confidence to start the interviewing process in an organized and relaxed manner.

The selected group for research was the Research and Development Team, a group of special education personnel who have participated as a collaborative group since 2004. There have been a total of 34 personnel since the team's inception; however, no more than 25 participated during any 1 year. Fifteen personnel, of the 1st year's team have returned every year. Four personnel, of the 1st year's team, have participated for 4 years and four others have participated for 3 years. This is a total of 23 personnel who have a 3 to 5 year return rate on the research team. Eleven other personnel on the team have participated on the team 1 to 2 years.

Twenty-five of the 34 Research and Development Team personnel met the purposeful criterion population established by me. The purposeful criterion framework was employment in the school system's special education department at the beginning of the 2003-2004 school year and the continuation of employment in the special education department for the 2009-2010 school year. Nine of the 34 personnel that did not meet the purposeful criterion framework included four who had retired, four who were not employed in the school system for the 2009-2010 school year, and one who had changed classroom assignments from special education to regular education. I contacted the personnel who met the purposeful criterion population framework by email in January 2010. Sixteen, or 64%, of the personnel on the team agreed to participate, eight, or 32%, declined participation and one, or 4%, did not respond to the email.

Research began with eight personnel on the team selected of the Research and Development Team participating in a focus group conducted by me. Focus group participants, who comprised 50% of those who agreed to participate, were selected by me in order to provide a variety of job expertise and perceptions. My purpose for the focus group was to examine each participant's perceptions as a participant of a collaborative team, as well as how participation affected professional growth and skill development. Perceptions from the focus group interview

were then compared with results from personal interviews and documents reviewed to provide triangulation in the research.

I used Farlow's (2009) techniques for effective communication with the focus group. These techniques for developing rapport with participants were an approach to help in me obtaining the needed information in the focus group while maintaining the role of a moderator. Farlow's techniques focus on bringing out the opinions, feelings, and perceptions of each participant in regard to the research topic. Farlow suggested that after the interview protocol has been developed and personnel have been carefully selected, the quality of the information the researcher obtains is dependent upon the relationship that the researcher develops with the participants. It is important for me as the moderator of the focus group to create an environment where the participants feel comfortable enough to express and have their opinions accepted (Farlow, 2009). The first step in establishing rapport was offering refreshments prior to beginning the group discussion. During this informal time I greeted and joined in the conversation with the participants. The use of this technique, called the *lunchroom technique* or *principle of similarity*, was not to bias the group but rather to associate the participants with me in a pleasant activity (Farlow, 2009). My goal was to create a safe environment for participants so they would be willing to express their opinions during the interview process. The focus group started with an introduction to the research and reason for audio taping. I explained that what the participants were going to say was very important and that focus group participants were a representation of a larger number of participants. I then worked on establishing rapport during interviewing by using Farlow's technique of mirroring. Farlow explains mirroring as simply matching a behavior to body posture, facial expressions and breathing, choice of words, and voice tone or tempo. Mirroring this unconscious process of participants is one of the most

powerful methods of creating and maintaining rapport with participants during focus group interviews. *What* questions instead of *why* questions were used in development of the interview guide in order to elicit in-depth responses. After the focus group session concluded, I thanked the group as a whole and then each participant individually as they left the session. According to Farlow, this process of expressing gratitude helps make the discussion successful.

Focus group interview protocol contained 11 open-ended, predetermined, formatted questions using the research questions as a reference. This detailed script, which focused on open-ended questions, was used to facilitate in-depth dialogue, stimulate conversation and also to make it easier for me to analyze and compare the themes and patterns with the personal interviews. The audio taped focus group session lasted approximately 2 hours and occurred after the introduction of the research to the participants. Unlike personal interviews, information from the focus group could not be guaranteed to be kept confidential due to participants being in a group together and listening to each others' responses. They were assured that information gathered during the session would be treated confidentially by me by assigning a pseudonym, F-1 to F-8, during the transcription process, with the F identifying the focus group interview and the numbers differentiating one participant from the other. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time but no participant asked to be withdrawn. The conclusion of the focus group session consisted of a brief summary by me with time allowed for corrections by the participants.

All participants were personally interviewed and audio taped by one of two trained IRB interviewers. Personal interviews were used to provide more detailed and supporting information in a relaxed atmosphere. Research questions were used to develop interview protocol and consisted of 11 open-ended questions. A detailed script to structure consistency of data collection

and in-depth discussion was also used by the interviewers. Face-to-face personal interviews were conducted in the conference room of the participant's school to allow for privacy, comfort, and security. Each personal interview lasted approximately 1 hour. Although face-to-face interviews were time consuming, it allowed the data collection to be focused on only one participant at a time and for the interviewer to note non verbal actions of the participant. Prior to beginning the interview the participant was reminded by the interviewer of the intent of the research and given a review of the information in their previously signed informed consent. To ensure that the information gained from the personal interviews remained anonymous, each participant was given a pseudonym of I-1 to I-16 during the transcription process. The letter I indicates the personal interview and the number differentiating one participant from the other. These pseudonyms were in no way connected to the participants or to the timing of their interviews for the research.

I compiled demographic information about participants as a way to further define the interview population. This information was: (a) information about highest degree earned, (b) number of years in the teaching profession, (c) current special education assignment, and (d) total number of years each participated on the Research and Development Team. The participants included one special education participant with a bachelor's degree and one participant with a doctorate degree. Four participants had educational specialist degrees and 10 participants had master's degrees. The number of years of participants' teaching experience was divided into five categories: 3 or less years, between 4 and 7 years inclusive, between 8 and fewer than 18 years inclusive, between 19 and 30 years inclusive, and over 30 years. No participant had taught less than 8 years. Seven participants had 8 through 18 years of experience, while three participants had 19 through 30 years of experience. There were six participants who

had over 30 years experience as educators. Current special education assignments for participants were divided into five categories within the research study: (a) inclusion teacher, (b) resource teacher, (c) extended resource teacher, (d) school psychologist, and (e) system-wide personnel. Current special education assignments included one participant as an inclusion teacher, two participants as resource teachers, five participants as extended resource teachers, and one resource/extended resource teacher. Other areas of assignment outside of the classroom were that of school psychologist and six who were assigned to other system-wide positions. Participation on the Research and Development Team included: 11 who had participated every year, one who had participated 4 years, one who had participated 3 years, two who had participated 2 years, and one who had participated 1 year.

Documents related to the Research and Development Team from years 2004 to 2008 were reviewed (Appendix F). To check for consistency in themes and patterns a comparison was done of the data from the focus group session and the personal interviews. No additional themes were identified from the documents generated by the team during the period.

Several themes concerning special education personnel's perceptions of how their participation on a collaborative team affected their professional growth emerged from the analysis of the data. The themes that were identified as my perceptions prior to the research were (a) increased expertise and use of technology, (b) exhibited collaborative skills and improved interpersonal relationships, (c) developed increased understanding of curriculum, (d) presented evidence of increased job satisfaction, (e) demonstrated analytical abilities, and (f) illustrated enhancement in professional and creative expression. From the focus group and personal interviews additional themes emerged that I had not perceived prior to the research. The themes that emerged were: (a) understood the special education supervisor's role, (b) awareness of the

expertise of others, (c) increased respect from school professionals, (d) increased knowledge of current research, (e) leadership skills, (f) enhanced time management and organizational skills, (g) established consistency within the special education department, (h) developed diverse thinking, and (i) developed self-evaluation skills and empowerment. Boyce and Neale (2006) suggested that the general rule for sufficient sample size was when topics, themes, and issues are emerging from the interviewees in a consistent manner. It was noteworthy to this researcher that the themes and patterns were similar throughout analysis of all data.

Increased Expertise and Use of Technology

Sykes (1996) suggested that improving the educational process for students must begin with continuous learning on the part of the teacher. Where else is this more evident in education today than in the area of technology? All participants affirmed changes in their knowledge and skill development in the area of technology. Participants expressed that participation on the team assisted them in better understanding of the importance and impact of technology on their classroom. Participant I-2 explained, “Using the computer for an interest inventory can help students use time efficiently, learn from technology while also storing the data. This is a great benefit!” Another participant I-4 answered with the following simple explanation, “Many people have gotten a lot more comfortable with computer use.”

More than one participant echoed the same view on skill development as others had expressed. For example, when asked: Has participation contributed to your learning? There were numerous new skills cited that included: (a) learning to do podcasts, (b) organizing desktops, (c) conducting internet searches and research, (d) using flash drives, (e) changing printer settings, (f) gaining expertise in transferring information to PowerPoint, and (g) creating pamphlets. Participants continually confirmed this knowledge with examples of skills they had developed.

Participant I-7 explained, “We now know there are different ways to get information on the internet. We know which ones are relative and which ones are not. We know which things are researched-based and which ones are not.” This was also confirmed by participant I-10 who commented, “I love all the technical things we are learning. [We are] learning about how to employ the computer, use many of the programs to enhance learning either Smart boards or through individual websites that you stumble upon.” Participant F-2 added:

Yes, we have gone from using those big old floppies and CDs to now we all have multiple thumb drives. [We] know how to get on the internet on our laptops anywhere we go. We have to do it daily for the wireless. We know how to change our printer settings and transfer information into a media presentation.

Prior to participating on the research team, technology skills for some participants were nonexistent. Participant I-2 shared that prior to her first time on the research team she did not know how to turn on the computer. She candidly described her own skill level:

I have grown tremendously in my use of technology. I could turn on a computer, I suppose, to check my email but as far as using the resource of the internet for research purposes I did not use. It’s [technology] just made our efforts to gather information much more efficient. [We were not] technologically able to cut and paste and retain that information and share it with others on our research team. I could never have done that to begin with on my own with my limited understanding of technology.

Participant I-6 discussed current technology skills as a major growth area and added:

I mean we went from using Apples and not knowing anything about PCs, including myself, to all of us being versed in how to use Word, how to search the internet, how to look up good websites and how to evaluate websites.

Participant I-9 described others' increasing technology skills as well as her own:

I see an increase in technological skills especially computer skills. A couple of ladies that have been on teams that I have worked with the last couple of years, for sure, have learned more technology uses on their computers. Last year, I learned how to use Publisher. I hadn't used Publisher before last year and now I use it [Publisher] too for after-school stuff on my laptop. I am using it to make a church bulletin so it went beyond school for me.

Two participants stated they now feel comfortable developing presentations for the State Special Education Conference and expressed they would not have had the skills or self confidence 5 years ago.

All of those interviewed stressed the importance of technology as another area in which they had increased skills. Participant F-7 described the ways she involved technology with her students by explaining that she had found better websites through participation on the team. In his research Sykes (1996) suggested that improving the educational process for students must begin with continuous learning on the part of the teacher. This suggestion was shared by participant I-4 when she referred to how she had incorporated new technology skills in the classroom. She stated, "I use students' time more efficiently; students can learn from teacher's increased knowledge of technology." Participant I-11 reflected:

I have learned so much just using technology that has been helpful. I bring it [technology] back into the classroom now. Little things mean a lot and there is always something new, three or four things new in technology that we get to do every year.

Participant F-8 confirmed that they had attended other staff development trainings where they had been introduced to new technology skills but had not followed through with what they had learned with implementation in the classroom.

Exhibited Collaboration Skills and Interpersonal Relationships

The benefit of participation on a collaborative team as a professional training focus was suggested by Richardson (1994). In his study Richardson found that participants experienced varied levels of skill development and interpersonal expectations. Throughout the interview process there were numerous participants who discussed how participation on the collaborative team improved their interpersonal relationships. Participant I-3 described her participation on the team by stating, "I like being part of a progressive, conservative group of special educators that are caring, want to do the best for students and want to maintain best practices."

Camaraderie was used by four participants as a word to describe team participants' relationship. Participant I-1 explained how she looked forward every day to participating on the team during the summer. She explained that the camaraderie and relationships built with other team members were the main things she enjoyed. Participant I-15 described the professional development that occurs from participation on the team, "It is just kind of icing on the cake." Participant I-6 described how the team had broadened their awareness of what they were doing but what she really loved was the pleasant atmosphere as the result of the camaraderie of teachers helping each other in the collaborative process. In an incident that had happened the past summer an example of bonding and camaraderie between participants was related by I-2:

It's just such a close knit group. It is a pleasant thing to be a part of and a surprising thing. He [one personnel on the team] came back two days after having a stint put in. I

mean that was unbelievable that he came back. You know he didn't have to. He said, "I didn't want to miss it." Those are things you remember forever.

Five participants explained that prior to participation on the Research and Development Team they only associated with the special education personnel in their school. Participants F-1 expressed that she now compares notes on what works and what does not work with others across the county. Participant I-2 expressed, "Well, on a personal basis, it has been good because I have gotten to know a lot of other teachers in the county that I normally would not see." Participant I-16 stated, "I think the relationship between the people [personnel on the team] has really changed because when we first started nobody knew each other and now they pretty much, they've worked with each other." Participant F-1 described how she had not had the opportunity to build relationships with other special education personnel in the county and gave the following details:

There is such geographic isolation in some areas of the county. Schools are so far away from the others. The smaller schools are unique places because they are smaller and there may not be anybody else to bounce things off. A huge benefit of the summers together, build relationships, and let you know that there is somebody else out there struggling the same way you are.

This was also expressed by another Research and Development Team participant I-9:

I think one thing is we didn't know each other [personnel on the team] because we hadn't been with each other. In the past we had to hash through ideas and things so that we had to rely on what other people told us, rumors about people which just gets you in the negative.

The time spent working with others from different parts of the county was best summed up by participant I-11 in the statement, “I feel like it increases good working relationships between people [personnel on the team] that I sometimes don’t see any other time during the year.”

Participation on the team was described as a way of getting to know and understand fellow teachers. The time allowed personnel the opportunity to learn one another’s professional strengths, personalities, and experiences. Participant I-14 said, “[I] know that there is that common respect and those times when we [personnel on the team] have been in awe of one another’s little flashes of brilliance.” This experience of respect was also reflected by participant I-2 with optimism:

I have just enjoyed tremendously the opportunity to be with other professionals even though it was a work session. It [summer session] was always pleasant and we have always been respectful. I can’t recall any time when someone took offense or was not cooperative to me. Twenty-five adults working together with so many different ideas is just a tremendous experience in itself.

Participant I-6 added, “My respect for my team members is very high, very high. I know how hard they work and their work ethics. Also, how much they love what they are doing or they wouldn’t be there.”

In the focus group participant F-1 discussed the importance of collaboration and interpersonal skills:

There are so many side benefits that we never expected when we first started. We [personnel on the team] didn’t realize that a bunch of people that didn’t know each other would come together and build relationships over years that are very close and very mutually positive. There are people from 40 miles away from each other that didn’t know

anybody but by name. They didn't share students and there were only one or two people that were system-wide that ever saw everybody. I know that was my point of view being a classroom teacher. I knew names but that was it. And so that was a side benefit, building that rapport and that relationship that you can say things and brainstorm and nobody thinks you are nuts because we all know where we are coming from.

This was reinforced by participant F-8 who added to the comments about how she learned to trust individual participants on the team:

You learn to trust your team members. I had gotten to know everybody so well and was beginning to respect everybody and how much they knew. I just trusted that the team that picked materials that had the best interest and they had a lot of experience. If you trust the people that make decisions, then you go in it with a better attitude. People outside, that don't work on the team, they don't know the people involved as well. They don't have that trust.

When asked, "How does your participation on the team make you feel as an individual and a professional?" this question was answered by three participants giving similar responses. They knew working with the team produced items that were going to be beneficial to everybody in the county. This team concept was described by participant I-5 reflecting on her experiences:

I feel like I am part of a team. I feel included. I feel like that if I have an issue that now, I feel certain that I am not the only one that has had that issue. I [personnel on the team] can find another person to see what their way of dealing.

This was echoed by participant I-3:

[I am a] stronger team member, close to other team members. You're part of a team, you're included, and the issues are not only one person's. How you deal with it? [I feel] close, connected, a voice. I feel good.

Just as Fisher and Ury (1991) defined collaboration, focus group participants often described collaboration as people working together side by side, not at opposite ends. Participant I-6 added:

You're with all 25 people working side by side and often rotate among groups so you really can see the professional base of each person. The different ways of thinking and different types of training help in working to solve problems.

This was also acknowledged by participant I-5, who explained, "It is amazing to me that you can have 25 people in a room and have such different dynamics and yet work cohesively as a group." Participant I-6 acknowledged, "How close I have become to the group! Twenty five people with different dynamics, but can work together."

Participants elaborated on the friendships, closeness, family type relationships, and willingness to help others that had developed and still continue from being part of the collaborative team. The family feeling was explained by I-13, "Yes, a family feeling and learning from others. Learning from each other's strengths and we complement each other. We [are] more of a team as a whole." Responses from two participants in the research were similar. Participant F-2 expressed in her comment, "It's kind of like family, kind of like sisters. We're [personnel on the team] a whole bunch of sisters with a couple of brothers." Participant I-12 made a similar comment, "I didn't expect to feel like I had an extended family, that I had a lot of support. I didn't expect to look forward to seeing that many people all the time."

Several reflected, as did Panitz (1996), about how they now have a group support system with other professionals and a feeling of empowerment from working with others. They also are now aware that they have someone to contact about problems or concerns they might have during the school year. Participant I-1 expressed, “It is just nice to be with the group and realize that their challenges are my challenges too”.

Developed Increased Understanding of Curriculum

Historically within the different special education classrooms throughout the county I have observed much diversity in curriculum and delivery. The responsibility to educate special education students in the classroom was placed on the building level special education teacher. It was the teacher’s responsibility regardless of past experiences, training, or materials available to provide curriculum based on students’ annual goals and objectives. Pressure placed on teachers to educate and then ensure all students are meeting goals and progressing is an enormous task.

During the Research and Development Team, personnel discussed sharing ideas on effective ways to work with students. Time spent being exposed to new materials while learning how to research what best meets students’ needs from the autistic child to the child with a reading disability was beneficial. When participant F-2 of the focus group was asked about her participation on the team, she recalled, “A bonus came from finding out that middle and high school students were using the same books. Now curriculum is aligned from grade to grade.” Participant I-3 expressed, “I think we have done a much more comprehensive job of coordinating our efforts to align, even with the state curriculum, not just here within Roane County.” Five responses made by research participants echoed that they discovered, through discussion on the Research and Development Team, important points in understanding the use of curriculum. Participant F-1 agreed:

We were talking about how they were using the same books at middle school and high school. You remember that? There was no talk about that before the team started. We never even thought these kids were repeating the same books year after year. So what are they learning? That is when we all [personnel on the team] started looking at alignment. Not just from school to school but from grade level to grade level. We looked at alignment from the bottom up as a transition process.

Participant I-6 reported a reading curriculum had been adopted by the special education department and had changed instruction. Before the adoption of the program every teacher was doing his or her own thing:

Some of the teachers were not really in the 21st Century. I hate saying that but I mean they were using old mimeographs of things they had in file folders, in file cabinets from years ago. They weren't really addressing current best practices with reading. When they [RAD Team] had to evaluate curriculum for adoption and look at all the different areas, [and] the five pillars that are based on the National Reading Panel, which they didn't know about before.

The participants indicated that they continuously search for ways during the school year to meet the educational challenges their students demand. The summer sessions have allowed the participants to have uninterrupted time to meet these challenges by providing the opportunity to investigate topics and have group discussions on how to choose materials using a standardized process. This is one of the beneficial activities Starr (2009) suggested that might occur in a collaborative group. The Research and Development Team personnel who participated in the research emphasized that there is always a need to create new products, align procedures, and research current trends to best serve students. They also described that one valuable learning

experience was being able to understand curriculum and what was available. Training and time spent in the curriculum adoption with vendors coming to the session was discussed. Participant I-2 shared:

Having the time to have vendors come in and teach us about products and how we could implement them in the classroom with technology has absolutely helped us align our student goals with what the state department would have us to produce.

The Public Education Network and The Finance Project (2005) included curriculum development as one of seven characteristics of quality professional development. Permitting publishers to present materials and having materials available to review during the summer work sessions was an important learning experience. The participants expressed that this experience allowed members of the Research and Development Team a chance to review materials in depth and have time to evaluate using a rubric the team designed. Five participants echoed that through this experience, they learned how to choose appropriate materials that would best serve the needs of their own students not just selecting curriculum materials without any guidelines. Participant I-6 described the experience with curriculum evaluation as having the personnel on the team working with other team participants to help learn new things from each other.

Interviewees continually described being more involved in the school where they are assigned because of participation on the Research and Development Team. Participant F-1 shared how other teachers were coming to her for opinions and guidance in curriculum then smiled and stated, “They’re coming to [me], they’re coming to me for reading.”

Presented Evidence of Increased Job Satisfaction

Eaker and Keating (2008) reported educators are leaving the profession in great numbers and expressed the answer is not getting more teachers but rather keeping good teachers. These

researchers also stressed that keeping good teachers while at the same time improving schools can only be achieved through professional learning communities or collaborative cultures. Gould (2008) suggested that because teachers often work without adult interaction much can be gained when teachers collaborate with colleagues. This suggestion was echoed throughout the interview process by all of the participants regardless of experience levels. A major benefit of participation on the team was the ability to find solutions to the many situations faced daily in the classroom. Participant I-10 described how participation on the Research and Development Team has helped her feel more confident in her job and happier knowing that her opinions and ideas were of value. The prevalent feeling of those interviewed was summed up by participant I-10, "I think we feel more comfortable in our job and we are happier because we have a lot of input." Twelve participants agreed there is increased job satisfaction and increased morale within the department. They expressed the desire to feel valued as professionals and share in the decision making process because it affected them. Participant I-6 described how team participants had changed, "I have seen them totally change their attitude toward their job."

The interviewers also asked, "How does your participation on the team make you feel as an individual and professional?" Participants described their participation using many different words and phrases. Some of the words and phrases were enthusiastic, great, appreciated, rejuvenated, exciting, stimulating, satisfied, wonderful experience, invigorating as a teacher, honored to be a part of, and most enjoyable. Participant I-4 shared, "It's given me purpose and I think sometimes teachers lose that purpose in performing routine instruction. Our students are often fatiguing because we see little increments of progress compared to a general classroom." Three participants shared personal perceptions of how they felt more knowledgeable about trends and best practices, valued, and proud of their accomplishments. Participant I-7 shared how others

want to be a part of the team stating, “Yes, it’s a stroke. [I] want to keep my place because lots [other special education staff] are in the wings waiting to take your place.” Participant I-1, who had been on the team in the past but was currently not on the team, expressed her desire to be a part again of the team stating, “So many waiting in the wings. Everybody! I’ve got to get on!” Participant I-8 told her story of how she felt valued:

As, I have said before, it makes me feel more valued. You know, like they care about what I think and consider me to have some knowledge in the areas. It [participation on the team] makes me feel good; as a professional, to continue to grow every summer in all different areas whether it is technology or learning about the newest programs offered through the special education department. I have nothing other than good to say about the RAD Team in all areas.

The sense of value was also expressed by participant I-5 who shared her reasoning, “Monetary great! Thanks to supervisor who appreciates the value and who values us.” The elation that was expressed by participant I-8 could almost be felt in the words she uses to describe her experience, “It’s just truly a joy to work with and get to know these team members! They are really great people! Very interesting people, I try to make myself more like them and just try to learn from each experience.”

When discussing benefits that participants have gained from participation on the team there was a range of reasons given. Three participants noted they felt they had been heard and felt better about their job because they have been part of the decision making process and understanding the reasoning for doing certain procedures. Participant I-11 discussed change and how if a person really wants something changed then the person has to become a part of the change. Through the Research and Development Team she expressed she had been able to

experience the changes starting with the 1st year, “It [the Research and Development Team] just gets better every year!” Participant I-2 conveyed, “I always look forward to going. It is probably one of the highlights of my summer!” A similar statement was made by another participant I-15, “It’s been a wonderful influence and something I look forward to doing every year!”

Demonstrated Analytical Abilities

One activity that participants participated in was learning to use data that enabled development of their analytical skills. Eight participants expressed similar opinions to data training. Participant I-6 elaborated:

The Research and Development Team has conditioned us; it conditioned us and prepared us for the data teams and the state wanting us to be able to interpret and use TVAAS information. Even now with school wide positive behavior training, we’re going to be the ones training the other teachers. Special education personnel are also helping in making some decisions while teaching other teachers how to analyze data.

Participant I-4 expressed how the collaborative team experience had contributed to improving classroom instruction, by using data. She stated, “We [special education teachers] use data to the fullest. We can use data to see where we need to improve. All year long we are collecting data on our students.” Participant I-7 expressed a similar opinion:

We’ve spent a lot of time on data and looked at each child and thought about what happened this year or what do we think we did well that caused good [scores] or what did we not do that maybe made the scores not like we wanted. I think analyzing the data has been very eye opening.

Another area of analytical ability in which the participants have expressed new skill development is in knowing how to evaluate curriculum materials. According to participant I-16:

I've learned really better how to evaluate materials and apply the skills to analyze curriculum materials. Even though we went through that process in college classes, now that I'm in a classroom, revisiting that [evaluation of curriculum materials] and sharing the information with other people, I think I could analyze a textbook on my own and know if it is going to be appropriate.

This new development of analytical skills was especially impressive to participant I-16, "Knowing how the curriculum affects the child, what you are going to teach them, and how you choose the materials you're going to use has an effect on your students." This participant unknowingly reflected the suggestions of Sykes (1996) that improving the educational process for students must begin with continuous learning on the part of the teacher.

Another question was asked by the interviewer, "Has the collaborative team contributed to improving instruction to meet the needs of our special education population?" Participant I-14 pointed out, "Each team researches programs and strategies. I think, they are learning more about the programs plus they are learning what works, what doesn't work, and whether we [special education department] should spend money on or not." This sentiment was confirmed by participant I-4:

Definitely! We [special education teachers] really use data to the fullest now. I mean we know what it [data] can give us and we know how to use it. I think that has improved instruction. We've looked at the data to see what areas we needed to improve on; and then we [RAD Team] picked a math curriculum, a reading curriculum for the students that really seems to be working. All that came from the RAD Team.

Another area in which the team has improved their analytical abilities is by being creative and looking more system wide within the special education department. This has not always

been possible because often special education teachers and staff are focused on their classroom and are unable to view the program as a whole. Participant I-6 explained how this had changed with the team, “They [the team] look globally at problems and instead of griping about it they are looking for solutions. That’s a big difference!” Participant I-10 summed up the thoughts of others by sharing, “I mean I am pretty analytical anyway but by looking at the direction things are going, while you are in the middle of it, you see the end that you want to accomplish.” In addition to the obvious benefits, participant I-13 added:

We [the Research and Development Team] have more time also to commit so we may talk about something one day and three days later we are still thinking and we come back and still discuss. It’s a committed amount of time. We can process it. We have time to process it and still discuss it until we leave. I think time is huge and the consistency of the same people that we are speaking with while working on the team.

Participant I-6 shared that in a previous job she had the following experience:

In a different school system coming in they didn’t know about my background and didn’t care. They didn’t know my areas of expertise or weakness. They just wanted me to do a job and never ask me my opinion on anything. They didn’t want to hear it. That’s what, to me, the Research and Development Team has done for us because now we can use our creativity and analyze problems and come up with answers.

Illustrated Enhancement in Professional and Creative Expression

Being able to enhance professional and creative expression in the daily teaching experience was discussed in the interviews. The Research and Development Team personnel created new products, which is one of the beneficial activities Starr (2009) suggested might occur in a collaborative group. Aligning procedures and researching current trends allowed

personnel to use their own creativity. This was confirmed by participant I-12's statement, "Using creativity and analyzing problems is what we do on the Research and Development Team." The amount of individual and group learning was expressed by participant F-1:

One pleasant experience is just watching them [other team members] work. To me, they come up with great ideas that are just so creative and so doable. They're excited to implement because they had a part in it. It's so not like that top down effect that you have so many times.

Some of their creativity has been used in the creation of the traveling trunks that are a benefit to all special education teachers and students. Participant I-3 related her experience developing traveling trunks:

I thought it was a lot of fun to participate in making the first reading material. I have never been a real crafty type of person but I enjoyed taking the book that we did, *Stelluluna*, and coming up with as many creative ideas and materials as we could get into that little box. It was like a treasure hunt.

Manuals, forms, and booklets have also been created with Roane County Special Education Department's needs in mind. Some of the phrases participants used to express this use of creativity were that using technology was enjoyable and a way for them to add their creative touch while they learned how to make text sets, brochures, booklets, and pamphlets. Another area that the personnel explored was the writing of grants, an area in which none of the personnel on the team had prior experience. Several participants also stated that they have learned more about teaching methods from Research and Development Team participation. This joy of collaboration, discussion, and dialogue is implied in Hilliard's (1991) work. Participant I-9

expressed her thoughts in a single sentence, “The Research and Development is a great program!”

Understood the Special Education Supervisor’s Role

Participants often suggested that it is hard to see beyond their classroom and they often lose perspective. Participant F-4 expressed her realization in the following sentence, “The Research and Development Team has opened me up to thinking outside the box. I can now see the big picture.” Likewise, participant F-8 replied:

I have learned more of what we can expect from our supervisor. I now understand there are limits on our program financially. I also understand better why no, has to be the answer sometimes. This experience has made me more aware of each other’s role, limitations and the need for structure. The supervisor taking the time to explain how positions are earned and figured was beneficial.

Participation on the team helped participant I-16 better understand the dynamics of the special education department:

There are so many other things that are impacted. It [special education department] is a big, a big ball of wax. There is a lot to it. I think you also learn to appreciate. When you are in your little role out there and you do your job you don’t realize it is much more involved than your little niche. There is so much more going into the job you are doing above you that you don’t know about, all the dynamics coming down from above.

Participant I-1 agreed:

We [the Research and Development Team] don’t often see in our day-to-day workings what perhaps the supervisor might see, how much the supervisor has to play in the role, in the requirements and day to day necessities of each teacher, or expectation that each

teacher must have in their role. In other words, I think we [personnel on the team] have a better understanding of how special education fits into our day to day working, our day to day lives. I guess you could say, I don't think we realize the full requirements for state and federal regulations and also within our school system.

Some participants expressed that they are now more comfortable talking with me. Participant I-2 admitted that sometimes teachers are slow to recognize others' responsibilities:

Before the Research and Development Team and before attending conferences with the supervisor I was scared to talk to her. Now going out to eat at conferences and the supervisor hosting a Christmas Cookie Swap has made me more comfortable with her. I don't mind seeing her now when she comes to my school.

Participant F-1 expressed how her relationship with me had changed as a result of her experience on the team:

My relationship with my supervisor has definitely changed because to start with I didn't know her really. I didn't have a relationship other than an employee/employer relationship. Over the years I have learned that she [me] is very open to allowing us to do things and be creative. She really trusts us professionals. That [trust] had been lacking in previous employers in different systems that I had worked in. So having the openness to be able to go to her and say, "This isn't working." or "This person needs not be on the team." or "We need to discuss how this person behaves on the team." Those kinds of things I thought I would never be able to do. Now I am totally comfortable and that part has really changed the relationship, the working relationship as professionals.

One of Gould's (2008) four factors for professional development includes administration support for staff development. Participant F-7 verbalized, "No one liked it before when she [me] came

into the schools. When she would enter my building, someone would buzz down and warn us. Now it is more like she [me] is here. Didn't you want to ask her something?" Participant F-2 interjected:

I think office staff may have had that impression because I think that there are very few supervisors that come into the building as much as she [me] comes into the buildings. I think that is exactly why you maybe have office staff making those statements and warning the staff.

Participant F-2 described how she took projects home to work on during the 2 weeks and shared that it was not like the experience of working a school. At the end of the day they could not just let it go and come back the next day to work on the projects. The high level of expectation I expected was also described by participant I-9, "It was a little more stress than I had anticipated but in a kind of good way. Like it was making you strive to achieve, kind of like how we expect our students to do."

Awareness of the Expertise of Others

From the interviews it was evident that in new or unfamiliar situations the Research and Development Team personnel know who is skilled and has experience in a variety of areas. As evident in her research, Starr (2009) stated that one benefit achieved from collaboration included expertise of participants. In a small school where there is no other special education staff being able to collaborate with other educators may be a problem because there is no one who shares the same issues and concerns. The Research and Development Team has helped the personnel on the team gain new contacts who have expertise. This availability of a support group enables them to collaborate during the school year when they have a problem. As Gould (2008) suggested, they

realize that they are not alone. From participant F-2's perspective, the benefits of the newly gained contacts were expressed:

During the school year if you have a certain situation come up, a computer issue or you get a new disability that you have no experience with being in this group give you individuals to help you with an issue or problem. You know you can call that person and they can give you help throughout the year instead of just kind of feeling like you are on your own.

Participant F-8 expressed that in addition to the obvious benefits to themselves, they also felt others in the special education department would benefit from the training and she stated:

You learn more about teaching the first year you are put into a classroom than you ever learned in college. The Research and Development Team is like a Master's or Doctorate Program in a way because you've been there, you kind of see what is needed, and you learn so many ways to deal with all of that. I wish all of our young teachers could rotate through [the summer session of the Research and Development Team] because they would learn so much.

When the question was asked, "Has participation on the team contributed to the learning of other members?" participants expressed their thoughts in related language. Three participants shared similar phrases that they believed they were empowered by participation on the Research and Development Team. Four participants identified that it had empowered their peers through the sharing of knowledge and new skills they had gained as a member of the team.

Increased Respect from School Professionals

Respect from other professionals appeared to be important to the participants. Six participants expressed that they felt more professional, experienced more credibility with others

in their building, and are included in more school meetings because administrators are aware of their membership on the Research and Development Team. Findings from the interviews included examples to support this change. This example from participant F-7 included the following comment:

We are now included on committees more because of research done by the team [the Research and Development Team]. [One] example is being included with the general education textbook committees. They know we have done some research and we are making some comparisons and attempting to achieve the same standards that they are trying to achieve. I think we [personnel on the team] are included more because I know they used to have the meetings just for regular education teachers. Well now we have a meeting for special education teachers.

Participant F-2 was candid with her quick response, “Before, I always felt like one of my students because we never were involved in anything. Now we are involved and I think the development of the Research and Development Team has made this possible.” Participant F-5 agreed and added to the comment with descriptive details:

I think we’ve developed more credibility from our administrators and other general education teachers because they know that we participate in this group [the Research and Development Team] and that we have come together as a cohesive group to be very productive. Even in presenting information at state conferences I think has gained [personnel on the team] a lot of esteem from other school professionals. The only thing with that is that they [school professionals] see the work we do and they will want to volunteer you for everything at your school.

This credibility also carried over into other areas. Participant I-8 shared:

I think we are having an effect on the book people. They are saying that we have teachers all of a sudden that are ganging up, doing professional work and demanding better materials. I think that is going to lead to development by them [publishers] of better materials.

The question was asked, “How has your participation on the collaborative team impacted you?” Participant F-2 included her opinion in her answer, “Their views matter.” From the interviews participants F-2 also expressed that colleagues appreciated more what they have to say because they know they are well informed and are up on current practices in education. Also their [personnel on the team] status as part of the faculty has improved as well as with other teachers. Two participants see this as a direct benefit of the knowledge they have gained by participating on Research and Development Team. Participant I-10 shared her thoughts:

I have been on the team since the very beginning and I think we get respect. They [principals] come to us and ask stuff. I think our principals are seeing that because we started the data [teams at schools].

This opinion was strengthened by participant’s I-13 response:

You know that teachers used to have a meeting where the principals would meet with them. Well, now we [special education department] also have the time to meet with the principals, just the special education teachers. So, we are part of everything now. We are included in everything.

Increased Knowledge of Current Research

Comments were made by the participants that reflected their increased knowledge of current research. Participants expressed that they have a much broader understanding of curriculum materials, keeping up with trends and best practices, critically reviewing programs

and strategies, being open to new curriculum ideas, and having expertise in research-based approaches to working with students. Participant I-14 expressed, “In essence, just knowing what’s current helps me stay current with my students.” Participant I-9 expressed a similar view, “It [the experiences] just gives you more, more tools in your toolbox to be able to take out and use when you need them.” Participant F-6 commented on what she felt was an important component of her involvement on the team:

I think the focus of the team is that we are able to focus on the child. Our education is for exactly that. It is what we are here for to educate the child and to better serve that child. And with the research and current trends, we are able to do that and I feel like we are more in tune with our children now because of this group.

Participant F-3 expressed her reasons for staying on the team had changed over time. She shared the following:

Every summer when the two weeks comes around I say, “Oh no, I have to get up early.” My husband says, “You don’t have to do that two weeks’ work during the summer.” And I say, “Well, I work for more reasons than the money. I work because I learn a lot and I also feel like I’m up on things when school starts. I know what the team has done that year and if they developed new forms or whatever.” I feel like I’m in the know.

Participant F-8 agreed, “That’s right. If you ever cut the pay, I bet most of us would show up.”

Participant F-4 reflected that in the beginning she participated for the money but now the focus has changed. She now participates because she does not want to miss anything new in the field and also to be able to increase her skills and knowledge. She added her thoughts:

One of the strengths was that we started looking on line and there is so much now on the latest research, best practices, strategies you can use and that we learned. I think that has

opened up everybody because you have time to talk about it and discuss the curriculum materials that are available.

Participant I-12, who had left the team for a year and was able to return, summed up the opinions of many participants by sharing, “It’s happening and I want to be part of it and not be on the outside again.” Participants expressed how their understanding of current research supports programs within their own classrooms. Three participants described using read-aloud strategies based on what they had learned during the summer. Participant I-8 described using read-aloud and commented, “I enjoyed listening to new literature and got a fresh perspective on taking breaks. [It is] important for students to have those breaks also.” Participant I-15 added, “I, too, read-aloud. When questioned by the office why, I can explain and have data supporting read-aloud time.” Participant F-8 shared that her students also perceived the same benefits and have developed a different outlook on reading:

Now there is read-aloud. Now I have a reason for doing it. If somebody comes in and says, “Don’t you think you are wasting instruction time by reading aloud?” I can come back with all kinds of data that supports all the good that it is doing and it gives my kids a break that they desperately need.

The Public Education Network and The Finance Project (2005) emphasized that classroom practices must focus on areas of achievement needed by student in order to have successful outcomes.

The use of data to interpret student achievement as well as participation on their school’s data team also indicated increased knowledge by the participants. Data teams were the results of training provided to participants during the summer of 2007 and then implemented in the schools the following year. Schools that have a data team are chaired by special education teachers who

have received training on data analysis. Having the skills and knowledge to train other teachers on using data in their building has given the participants an expression of pride in themselves and their work. Participant F-8 who has taught for many years and who is very active in her school's data team expressed the following, "I came in with about 34 or 35 years of teaching experience. I have learned more from the Research and Development Team about methods, shared plans, and techniques than I ever learned in a college classroom anywhere."

Review of documents from the summer of 2008 indicated that the team generated the list of books to be studied for the following school year. In addition the documents indicated that the team researched books on a variety of topics specifically beneficial to other special educators. These books were purchased and were the beginnings of a professional library for the special education teachers.

Leadership Skills

Many of the participants in the past had not had the opportunity or experience to build leadership skills. Participant F-1 shared:

I've learned a lot more about how to work with people, how to problem solve when there are issues that come up, and how to work on your feet. Yeah, shoot from the hip; work off your feet and calm people down. A lot of people that are on the team would get overwhelmed when met with issues they couldn't figure out.

She also went on to share:

I look at myself as the spark, you know, for them [personnel on the team] to get started just like a match would because I don't have to keep them going. Sometimes I might have to contain the fire. Now being more of a catalyst to give them the idea that they can do anything. I think that has been a big part of it. I think professionally being able to deal

with a group of people for that long of a period of time doing that intense of work is important. So being able to direct, I guess that's the word, to direct the flow so that everything does get done when it needs to get done and it is done right.

Evidence of increased leadership was shown by the task list now being generated by participants rather than by me. From the interviews, participants expressed they were able as a result of team participation to be responsible for the direction of the team during the summer. Participant F-4 replied, "It [the Research and Development Team] has evolved from the first year when we were like, "What are we supposed to do?" Now we are driving what we are doing." They expressed that they felt capable to be given a list of tasks and then develop and research the information needed to complete the tasks with the next step generating the tasks. Participant F-2 added, "We have learned to take a leadership role."

This feeling of how others viewed personnel on the team as leaders was confirmed by a statement made by participant I-2:

Our principals and even the other supervisors have seen us being leaders in the county in information processing and data. They know we understand what they are being taught across the state in their meetings and so they have asked us to be leaders in in-service within our facilities.

Participant I-15 had a similar opinion and stated, "Principals and supervisors perceive us as leaders now that we have a better understanding of what is required. I feel like my opinions matter; I have more confidence to speak in front of adults." Participant I-7 explained her thoughts about how principals and supervisors viewed the Research and Development Team, "It's almost like we are leaders in something that we haven't ever been before. I think they [principals and supervisors] look at us differently." In the focus group discussion on leadership

roles, participants gave details about presentations they had presented at state conferences.

Participant F-2 shared how this new skill had carried over into her personal life:

The opportunities we have had to present at the state supervisors' conference have been, I think, given us all opportunities to grow. We had to rethink, reflect on our product and organize it in a way to teach other adults. That approach is sometimes similar to students; but the pressure is a little different. I think we all have gained. I know I can present now and not have that fear to speak to the board of education and stand up even in front of my congregation at church.

Other participants expressed that presenting at other conferences was evidence of these leadership skills. Participant F-8 proclaimed, "I am comfortable making presentations. Five years ago I would not have done it!"

Empowerment and leadership were further defined by participants because others now ask for their opinions and this has confirmed the development of their leadership skills. One participant recounted the importance of having to be a leader. The Research and Development Team is divided into smaller groups and a team leader is assigned, as a way to give all personnel on the team leadership experience. Participant I-11 shared, "We have all had to step up and be a leader as well as a follower within our own team. We've all had that opportunity." Another participant I-8 expressed:

We are put together in different teams every year and a lot of times one person is put in charge. They don't realize they can do that. They don't realize that they are a person that can be a leader, and that, sometimes brings out the leader in them in a smaller group setting.

The need to be more assertive, not so quiet and subtle, and to take leadership roles that may have never been offered before were also expressed as a benefit of participation on the team. Participant F-7 replied with a quick answer, “Great point! [I] used to be told what to do and had no control. Now we know why we do [it] and can defend what we are doing.” Many agreed and also noted that taking the initiative to develop new innovations comes from this increased sense of leadership. Participant F-4 illustrated:

A good example of that is when we decided as a group that we needed our forms online. I don’t think that was a directive. I think that was something that was a benefit of our being together and has been very helpful to me.

Participant F-7 reflected and summed up the team’s feelings of participation in the following response, “You all are the leaders now. The special education department takes the lead. [In] special education we find out what we want to, you know, do. We are leaders. That is basically what it is.”

Enhanced Time Management and Organizational Skills

In general participants expressed that their organizational and time management skills have been enhanced through participation on the team because of the number of tasks they have to complete within a limited time frame. Participant F-5 shared how her time management and organizational skills have changed, “I think it has helped us to be better time managers by organizing tasks in our mind, prioritizing, and then getting the job done.” Participant F-3 declared, “Yes, I am a better time manager!” Still another shared that she now uses technology, that she has learned by being a part of the team beyond the school environment and by knowing how to organize her time at home.

The team concept of organization to help with time management was also discussed. In comparing special education across the entire county consistency and organized were two words participants used to describe the program. Many of the participants echoed Norton and Lewis's (2000) suggestion that professional development is a cooperative process with a plan rather than each person seeking a different path. Participants described that they are now more organized by having manuals, booklets, and forms within the special education department, which the team has developed, instead of each person developing materials. Participant F-3 shared her personal reflection and elaborated, "I feel very much more organized by having the team. They organize things for us, the manuals, the disability booklets and forms." Participant F-2 also described what she considered a benefit of the organized forms, "You always know where they are and they are always up-to-date now. You don't have to search and wonder if you're going to have to change in 2 weeks because it is a different form."

Established Consistency Within the Special Education Department

Four participants acknowledged that establishing consistency within the special education department as well as aligning their classroom materials with the general education curriculum has helped communication and relationships between departments. Oliphant's (1990) suggestion, which can be a resulting benefit of collaboration, is that a sense of a common cause and a growing appreciation for others' knowledge and expertise provide teachers with a sense of community. When the question was asked, "Has participation on the team impacted others and how?" participant I-1 responded, "When others begin to understand other disciplines it has broken the communication gap; it has opened up [communication] between teachers; now you are tolerant of others and accepting of others." Participant I-2 noted, "We are able to, in our consistency, be able to communicate to parents the state standards. We're going to go about

teaching those standards and setting up our classrooms.” Participant I-9 added to this, “We don’t have to go and pull from the closet and everybody else’s stuff. We know what we are going to be doing and that is because of the team. We are all on the same page all over the county.” This consistency in curriculum for students also has an impact on teachers. Participant I-4 noted, “The curriculum is consistent across the county which means the quality is better. Opportunity for people to learn, [and] feel better about themselves has to impact their job in the classroom. Happy people do a better job.”

It was especially clear that the increased consistency within the special education department was beneficial especially when students transfer between schools in the county. A smoother transition now occurs because all special education personnel are using the same curriculum materials and strategies. This benefit of consistency in the curriculum materials was conveyed by participant F-5:

I think it also helped our communication with our students. They benefited when we could communicate better about their transfers, the students who move from school to school. We have a much better idea of what they had been doing and the materials they needed to go to in another school. Our relationships made it so that we could talk to each other more effectively for those students.

The consistency in both procedures and curriculum occurred as a result of the Research and Development Team and it has made transition easier for students when going to a new school. This consistency gives teachers control of students’ learning because they know the curriculum the student has been in previously and where to continue. Participant F-6 pointed out, “It’s not going to break the consistency. You’re not going to lose time in trying to figure out where this

child is because we are all on the same page.” Participant I-5 also discussed the benefits of the consistency of the curriculum for students who may move:

I think that getting our curriculum all as one, you know each school; the entire county uses the same curriculum. I think that has been very, very great for our staff and our peers. If a child were to move out of one county school into the other then there is a continuum there. There is an instant security there for them because that is the same book they’re on when they left the school. You know, “I know this; this is very familiar to me.” And I feel like that is making that environment feel secure for that child who in turn is getting to open up a whole new world of learning for him. We’re not going to lose that child. We’re not going to lose any time on that child because we’re going to be very consistent on our curriculum.

The time spent on the team process where participants can express their student’s curriculum needs and requirements helped make a more cohesive department throughout the county. Participant F-1 expressed, “Figuring out what we are going to do that will align everybody on the same page, and consistency has helped.” Participant F-5 added, “We are all moving in the same direction.” Other areas of consistency pointed out by the participants but less stressed were standardized paperwork and handbooks for assistants’ and attendants’ responsibilities.

Developed Diverse Thinking

In addition to the other themes, the need to think diversely and be more receptive to change within the department emerged. Educational backgrounds, personalities, and life experiences of each personnel on the team have helped change attitudes, resulting in much more diverse thinking and openness to suggestions from others. Variety of participants on the team

was suggested by Kirk and Walter (1981) when they identified that too much homogeneity in a group may decrease the depth and overall continuum of the discussion of ideas. Participant F-3 acknowledged:

There is one thing I would like to say. I don't know if it matters if I say the person's name or not. They are in this room. When they joined the team, I don't think they were on it originally, but when they joined the team, their whole attitude changed. There, well, I guess you call it, attitude, [they are] much more open to suggestions and just a team player, more like a team player.

Participant F-2 added to that sentiment:

The way the team is set up you work with everybody that is in the room. You don't just sit and get stuck with one or two people the whole time. You're with all 25 people and it rotates so you really can see the professional base that each person has and different ways of thinking and different types of training.

Perspectives from different parts of the county, different services, and different thought processes have helped participant's face the fact that they had to come out of their comfort zone at times because they were attempting to do unfamiliar things. Participants shared that it was interesting to hear other viewpoints. Participant I-5 commented:

I think I have become a much more open person all around not just in the classroom but in my personal relationships also. I think a lot of times I felt like if you are asking someone for help that's showing weakness. I have kind of learned that is not true.

Participants understand now that different points of view can be healthy and it is acceptable to share your opinions and ideas with others. Hunefeld (2009) refers to this type of staff development as "collaborative PD". Participant I-5 added:

What my school is learning, and what current research suggests, is that teachers don't improve by listening to someone tell them how to do something newer or better in their classrooms. They learn by working together to address problems they themselves identify in their schools and classrooms.

Learning to work with everyone on the team through the rotation process, mixing up groups and developing tolerance of others to meet common goals has changed some participants. Tolerance of others while being a participant on the team was expressed by participant I-16:

I think also it made people to be tolerant of others. I think that came into play. You began to know somebody, know more about them and it is just much easier to be accepting of their ideas. It's just rewarding all the way around when you can collaborate with other disciplines and that is what happened in RAD Team.

Participant I-8 expressed how she understood this change of emotions:

I think, too, part of that is you have to be humble. I don't mean just me but all of us. We have to be able to be humble and change what we do and not say, 'Oh, it's my way or the highway.

Participant F-4 explained how she now approaches team work after being part of the Research and Development Team and how it made a huge difference:

It has helped me tremendously just to see the big picture of everything. Sometimes I get so caught up in what I am doing that I just forget about what is going on with everybody and I think it brings me back to reality in a lot of ways. I can see exactly what all of you all are going through, sometimes we don't see because we are just focused on what we do. Now it has just been much, much easier for me to understand where each special education teacher is coming from.

Along with that comment, participant F-5 added:

To see beyond my classroom and, you know, we lose perspective of the larger community and tend to focus inward but now this collaboration process has really opened me up to thinking outside the box and listening to others.

Participant F-8's insight regarding collaboration was also expressed:

We can see different perspectives coming from different parts of the county, different positions in the county depending on what we do and I think that is important for all of us to see what we do and also to know what each other does.

Developed Self Evaluation Skills and Empowerment

Participants in the research were from different geographic areas of the county. The climate of the schools in which the participants were employed varied greatly as did the participants' viewpoints. Therefore, development of self-evaluation and empowerment skills for participants was another theme that emerged. Participants discussed ways in which they had grown through the process. Participant F-8 reflected on how she had changed by becoming more confident, "Our confidence has grown so much. Just to name one thing, it's just that whole process of working with people and getting to know them and back to that trust thing." She also expanded upon how the process of self-evaluation had increased through the help of the collaborative team process, "After joining the group, I realized my faults and strengths."

When asked to describe in more detail, participant F-8 explained:

You all don't realize we are a big county and sometimes you feel left out or you feel not appreciated. That is due to size and no time to ever get to know people, and then, when you got in this group you realized your faults and your strengths. I mean it made us all see our faults and our strengths and like all good professionals, you work to change that.

Throughout the interview process participants often referred to feeling more empowered as a result of participation on the team. Three participants expressed that they did not realize the importance of what they were doing until they started attending state conferences and collaborating with other professionals outside of the team. After talking with other professionals who had not had the same experience, one participant expressed that it made her feel better about the Research and Development Team. She felt like there was a sense of follow-through built into the collaborative team process rather than in previous training where there had been no follow-up. Participant F-7 contended:

You know they come in and sometimes you hear wonderful things but it is the beginning of summer or it's not uppermost on your mind. It's never mentioned again by anybody unless it comes back and floats up. With the Research and Development Team, there is follow-through on everything. You know it forces you to stay involved. You know, it keeps it uppermost on your mind. It just enables you to focus on those things. It is following through from one year to the next and it encourages you to stay with it.

Participant F-5 relayed the feeling of just going to a summer in-service session then never hearing about the topic again. She stated that the Research and Development Team was different, "There is following through with the Research and Development Team. [You] can stay involved. [It] enables you!" Hunefeld (2009) added validity to this opinion when he discussed that studies show that techniques taught in old-style professional-development workshop result in extremely poor classroom implementation. Participant F-1 expressed, "We are the experts, not strangers." While participant F-5 added, "We are the experts teaching each other." This was confirmed by participant F-6 who explained:

That is a great point because before if somebody from up above told you to do something, you did it just because. It was like there was an external control. You were told to do it and you really didn't have any control over it. Now, we do it and we know why we are doing it and it makes us more knowledgeable and we can tell our points and make people understand why it is important what we are doing because we participated in the process.

Hunefeld (2009) goes on to suggest that empowering teachers to see themselves as experts instead of spending exorbitant amounts of money on hiring outside experts to provide professional development helps all grow professionally. Participant F-4 added to that opinion by saying:

It's how we feel as a team, that we feel better about what we are doing. It's not, like we have said before, it is not a directive. It's something that we know why we are doing it. We feel good about why we are doing it because we had a hand in it.

The discussion was best summed up by participant F-1's statement, "Well, it's the empowerment. That's what we were talking about, that we have been empowered to make decisions and somebody actually asks our opinion as professionals."

In the interviews when the question was asked, "How has participation on the collaborative team impacted you?" participant I-5 used two words, very rejuvenated, to describe her experience. She expresses her thoughts and added:

It's given me a lot of self-respect and energy to try new approaches with my children in the classroom. It's given me assertiveness to know that the research based information that we have gathered is good and I can be confident when I share that with parents and general education teachers.

The word confident was elaborated on by I-7, “I feel more confident that I can pretty much do anything now. I am sure there are things I can’t do but I could tackle them. I wouldn’t be overwhelmed by them anymore. I think that has changed.” While others may have described the experience as an honor, participant I-11 articulated another outcome of participation on the team:

I think one of the greatest things for me on the team has been an increase in my self-esteem. Learning and just recognizing that when I have done something to go back and think I have been doing this right all this time. It’s okay that I have done it this way or then for someone else to ask me how I do something in my classroom because it has worked for me so well. It has been a big self-esteem booster for me.

Summary

As the data clearly indicated, the Research and Development Team personnel that participated in the research have evolved and changed over time. While personnel originally met to produce projects that were very task-oriented and directed by me, the Research and Development Team is now a group of professionals in the field of special education developing their own summer session task list. Participant F-1 best summarized, “The team now generates and decides their own fate and own curriculum, your own agenda of what you want to do. The purpose has totally changed.”

Lessons I have learned and challenges I have had to face during this process have added to changes and improvements in my effectiveness as an administrator. The years from 2004 to 2010 have been a period of growth for me, just as it has been for the team members. The value of these lessons continues to add to my own job satisfaction and how I view my effectiveness as an administrator.

There are several challenges that I had to face. The first year of the summer work session was an uncertain endeavor for me because this was the first time a staff development activity of this type had taken place in the school system. The anticipated success and productivity of the team was based on my trust in that 1st year's participants. The success that 1st year created a challenge to provide funds for the continuation of the team in the future.

The first session was based on my ideas of what needed to be accomplished within the system. I have now turned control over to the team members to decide the focus and the needs within the special education department. This empowerment of the team challenged me and caused a paradigm shift in my thinking about supervision, allowing the team members to develop their own leadership skills. Letting go of my administrative control over this aspect of the team has been difficult but in the long run has been beneficial.

I have learned to listen to the team members' points of view instead of making decisions without input from the ones who are affected by the change and who are the most knowledgeable of what needs to be changed. My decision to empower the team to act has made this process successful. This change has enabled me to stay informed and focus on what is important in the classroom instead of what I might think is important.

Improvement in my personal relationships with employees and how they view me as their supervisor has also changed. I trust and respect the expertise of the individuals on the team when they come to me with concerns. The freedom that comes from not having to micromanage employees has given me the time needed to address other areas of concern within the special education department thus making my job easier and has increased my effectiveness as an administrator.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The federal government is consistently adding requirements to teachers that burden the process of education for students (Public Law 107-110, 2002). Special education personnel are required to participate in high quality, researched-based staff development to help meet the demands of an ever-changing field. Administrators searching to design opportunities for research based training that is relevant to personnel within the school system may view this as a challenge. Villegas-Reimer (2003) suggested that the traditional system of staff development is no longer sufficient to meet the needs of professionals. From this research study I have concluded that one way to meet the challenge of high quality staff development is through collaboration or working in groups. As Darling-Hammond (1999) suggested allowing teachers control of the decision-making process and allowing them to determine methods and strategies that ensure student learning is necessary.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine perceptions of special education personnel as they pertained to professional growth and skill development as a result of participation on a collaborative team. Perceptions of participants were also compared to my perceptions. I perceived six themes that were: (a) increased expertise and use of technology, (b) exhibited collaborative skills and improved interpersonal relationships, (c) developed increased understanding of curriculum, (d) presented evidence of increased job satisfaction, (e) demonstrated analytical abilities, and (f) illustrated enhancement in professional and creative expression. Nine additional themes emerged from analysis of data. These themes were : (a) understood the special education supervisor's role, (b) awareness of the expertise of others, (c) increased respect from school professionals, (d) increased knowledge of current research, (e)

leadership skills, (f) enhanced time management and organizational skills, (g) established consistency within the special education department, (h) developed diverse thinking, and (i) developed self evaluation skills and empowerment. This section's general findings address the research questions to ensure that the data was represented effectively.

General Findings

This research focused on special education participants' perceptions of their professional growth and skill development through the use of a collaborative process. Public Law 107-110 (2002) included a provision for skill building and continued staff development for teachers. Analyzing the perceptions of participants is necessary for evaluating the effectiveness and quality of staff development. Data gathered during the interviews were analyzed and compared with my perceptions and results are included in this chapter.

All participants affirmed changes in their knowledge and skill development in the area of technology. Participants expressed that participation on the Research and Development Team assisted them in better understanding the importance and impact of technology in their classroom. Many of the responses made by the participants were similar. Technology skills that improved included the following: (a) learning to do podcasts, (b) organizing desktops, (c) conducting internet searches and research, (d) using flash drives, (e) changing printer settings, (f) gaining expertise in transferring information to PowerPoint, and (g) creating pamphlets, booklets, and brochures. It was revealed that prior to participating on the Research and Development Team technology skills for some participants were nonexistent. Many of those interviewed indicated they had increased skills in technology and as a result were better able to serve their students. Participants shared that they had attended other staff development trainings

where they had been introduced to new technology skills but had not followed through with what they learned with implementation in the classroom.

Throughout the interview process there were numerous participants who discussed how participation on the collaborative team improved their interpersonal relationships. The benefit of participation on a collaborative team as a professional training focus was suggested by Richardson (1994). In this study Richardson found that participants experienced an improvement in the development of interpersonal skills. Camaraderie was used by several as a word to describe their relationships. Many participants explained that prior to participation on the Research and Development Team they only associated with the special education personnel in their school. Some participants expressed that they now compare notes on what works and what does not work with others across the county. Participation on the team was described as a way of getting to know and understand fellow teachers. The time allowed participants the opportunity to learn one another's professional strengths, personalities, and experiences. Just as Fisher and Ury (1991) defined collaboration, the focus group participants described collaboration as people working together toward a common cause. They also elaborated on the friendships, closeness, family type relationships, and willingness to help others, that had developed and still continue from being part of the collaborative team. Several spoke, as did Panitz (1996), about how they now have a group support system with other professionals and a feeling of empowerment from working with others.

During the Research and Development Team the participants discussed sharing ideas on effective ways to work with students. The time spent being exposed to new materials while learning how to research what best meet students' needs, from the autistic child to the child with a reading disability, was described as being beneficial. Many of the responses made by the

participants echoed that they discovered through discussion important information in understanding the use of curriculum. The participants in the research indicated that they are continuously searching for ways to meet the educational challenges of their students. The summer sessions have allowed the participants an uninterrupted time to meet these challenges by providing the opportunity to investigate topics and have group discussions on how to choose materials using a standardized process. This is one of the beneficial activities Starr (2009) suggested that might occur in a collaborative group. The Research and Development Team participants who participated in the research emphasized that there is always a need to create new products, align procedures, review current materials, and research current trends to best serve students. The Public Education Network and The Finance Project (2005) included curriculum development as one of seven characteristics of quality professional development. Permitting publishers to present materials and having materials available to review during the summer work sessions was an important learning experience. Participants expressed this experience allowed them a chance to review materials in depth and have time to evaluate using a rubric they had designed.

Eaker and Keating (2008) reported educators are leaving the profession in great numbers and expressed the answer is not getting more teachers but rather keeping good teachers. These researchers also stressed that keeping good teachers while at the same time improving schools can only be achieved through professional learning communities or collaborative cultures. Gould (2008) suggested that, because teachers often work without adult interaction, much can be gained when teachers collaborate with colleagues. This suggestion was echoed throughout the interview process by all of the participants regardless of experience levels. A major benefit of participation on the team was the ability to find solutions to the many situations educators face daily in the

classroom. Many of the participants agreed there is increased job satisfaction and increased morale within the department as a result of participation on the Research and Development Team. Participants expressed the desire to feel valued as professionals and share in the decision-making process. Discussion on benefits that participants have gained from participation on the team included a range of benefits: (a) participants believed they had been heard, (b) participants feel better about their job because they have been part of the decision making process, and (c) participants gained understanding for the reasoning for doing certain procedures.

One activity participants took part in was learning to use data that enabled development of their analytical skills. Many participants expressed positive opinions about data training. One area of analytical ability in which the participants expressed new skill development was increased knowledge of how to evaluate curriculum materials. Creativity was also an area of new skill development that the participants exhibited.

The ability to enhance professional skills and creative expression in the daily teaching experience was discussed in the interviews. Several participants stated that they had learned more about teaching methods from Research and Development Team participation. The creation of new products by the team participants mirror one of the beneficial activities Starr (2009) suggested might occur in a collaborative group. Aligning procedures and researching current trends allowed participants to use their own creativity. Some of their creativity has been used in the development of traveling trunks that are available to all special education teachers and students. Manuals, forms, and booklets have also been created with Roane County Special Education Department's needs in mind. Participants expressed that using technology was enjoyable and a way to add a creative touch while they learned how to make text sets, brochures, booklets, and pamphlets.

Participants suggested that it is often hard to see beyond their classroom, and they may lose perspective. Some participants expressed that they are now more comfortable talking with me and how their relationship with me has changed by participating on the team. One of Gould's (2008) four factors for professional development included administration support for staff development. A supervisor in any organization has a view limited by her or his own experiences and perceptions. When a supervisor is conducting research involving employees, the truthful representation of participant views requires the supervisor as the researcher to understand how her or his assumptions differ from the participants. The supervisor needs to expand his or her understanding of the nature of the organization's culture as well as the relationships that exist between the supervisor and employees. As the supervisor it was critical that I be open to criticism from participants in order to arrive at the truth. I had to be open and willing to learn from the dialogue while conducting the research. It was essential that I maintained this point of view while I was conducting the focus group and clarifying the resulting dialogue of the participants.

Data analysis revealed that when participants found themselves in new or unfamiliar situations it was helpful to them to know who was skilled or had experience in that area. As evident in her research, Starr (2009) stated that one benefit achieved from collaboration included expertise of participants. The Research and Development Team has helped its members gain new contacts who have expertise. This availability of a support group enables personnel on the team the ability to collaborate during the school year when they had a problem. As Gould (2008) suggested they realize that they are not alone. Participants expressed that in addition to the obvious individual benefits they also thought others benefited from the training. They felt

empowered as a Research and Development Team participant because they were viewed as experts by their peers.

Respect from other professionals appeared to be important to the participants. Several expressed that they perceived themselves as more professional, experienced more credibility with others in their building, and are now included in more school meetings because administrators are aware of their membership on the Research and Development Team. This credibility also carried over into other areas and they now know that their views matter. Colleagues appear to appreciate more what they have to say because they are now well informed and have current knowledge on trends in education. Participants view this as a direct benefit of knowledge they have gained as a member of the Research and Development Team.

Comments were made by participants that reflect increased knowledge of current research. Participants expressed that they have a much broader understanding of curriculum materials, keep up with trends and best practices, critically review programs and strategies, open to new teaching strategies, and have expertise in research-based approaches to working with students. Participants expressed they do not want to miss anything new in the field and also want to continue to increase their own skills and knowledge. Participants also expressed how their understanding of current research supports programs within their own classrooms. The use of data to interpret student achievement as well as participation on data teams in their schools also indicated an increased knowledge by the team participants. The participants expressed pride in their work and themselves when using data skills and knowledge to train other teachers in their building.

Many participants have not had the opportunity or experience to build leadership skills prior to participation on the Research and Development Team. Evidence of increased leadership

was shown by a task list now being generated by team participants. In the interviews, participants expressed they were now able as a result of team participation to be responsible for the direction of the team during the summer. In the focus group discussion on leadership roles, participants gave details about presentations they had given at state conferences. Other participants expressed that presenting at other conferences was evidence of these new leadership skills. Because other educators now ask for their opinions, this has confirmed and empowered the participants' own leadership abilities. The need to be more assertive and take leadership roles that they might not have been offered before was also expressed as a benefit of participation on the team. Many agreed that taking the initiative to develop new innovations comes from this increased sense of leadership.

In general participants expressed that organizational and time management skills have been enhanced through participation on the team because of the number of tasks they have to complete within a limited time frame during the sessions. Others shared technology was being used beyond the school environment by helping to organize time at home. The team concept of organization to help with time management was also discussed. In comparing special education across the entire county, consistency and organized were two words participants used to describe the program. Participants are now more organized by having manuals, booklets, and forms within the special education department instead of developing their own.

Many participants acknowledged that establishing consistency within the special education department, as well as aligning their classroom materials with the general education curriculum helped communication and relationships between departments. Oliphant (1990) suggested that a sense of common cause and a growing appreciation for others' knowledge and expertise can provide teachers with a sense of community. This common cause for the

establishment of consistency within the special education department was noted as being particularly beneficial when students transfer between schools in the county. This consistency gives teachers control of students' learning because they know the curriculum the student has been exposed to and where to continue. Time spent in the team process where participants can express their student's curriculum needs and requirements has helped solidify the department throughout the county.

In addition to other themes the need to think diversely and be more receptive to change within the department emerged. The educational backgrounds, personalities, and life experiences of each team member have often helped make attitudes change, resulting in much more diverse thinking and openness to suggestions from others. Participants shared that it was interesting to hear other viewpoints and now understand that different points of view can be healthy and are acceptable. Learning to work with everyone on the team through the rotation process, mixing up groups to meet common goals, has helped participants develop interpersonal skills.

Development of self-evaluation and empowerment skills for team members was another theme that emerged. Participants discussed ways in which they had grown through the process, reflecting on how they changed by becoming more confident. Throughout the interview process many participants referred to feeling more empowered as a result of participation on the team. Several felt that there was a sense of follow-through built into the collaborative team process rather than in previous trainings where there had been no follow-up. Hunefeld (2009) suggested that empowering teachers to see themselves as experts instead of spending exorbitant amounts of money on hiring outside experts to provide professional development helps all grow professionally. Participants related that the experience on the team gave them self-confidence, that it was exciting and stimulating academically, boosted self-esteem and assertiveness,

empowered them, rejuvenated them, left them feeling valued, proud, accomplished, challenged, professional, and having made a contribution. As the data clearly indicated, the team and its participants have evolved and changed over time.

Recommendations for Implementation

Professional growth and skill development of personnel in the future will become more important in meeting the needs of students and personnel. Administrators who coordinate staff development should take into account teachers' perceptions of professional growth and skill development during the planning process. One important consideration in planning should take into account effects of professional growth and collaboration on student learning. Key components of the collaborative process should also be considered for effective professional growth for school personnel. Staff development coordinators should plan opportunities that promote teacher retention while at the same time improve schools and achieve higher levels of learning for both students and school personnel. Instilling in school personnel the benefit and desire of professional development as a way to be lifelong learners should be of utmost importance. Based on this research, the following recommendations should be considered when implementing a collaborative process:

1. Supervisor should require all 1st-year special education teachers to attend at least one session of the summer Research and Development Team session to participate in the collaborative process.
2. General education teachers should be included on the Research and Development Team as a means of getting other points of view.
3. Principals should be invited to attend at least one session of the Research and Development Team to give suggestions of needs within their schools. This summer a

principal attended and gave the suggestion to the team of developing materials for autistic students in her school.

4. A needs assessment survey should be conducted of special education personnel who have not had a chance to participate on the Research and Development Team in order to be informed of their perceptions of what has been accomplished and what might need to be done in the future. A postsurvey that might show gaps within the program should also be conducted.
5. The Research and Development Team concept for elementary, middle, and high school regular education professionals is suggested due to the benefits that have been realized within the special education department.
6. The Research and Development Team participants should be encouraged to invite a fellow educator to join them for a session to experience the collaborative process.
7. The collaborative team's work session should be continuous over a 2-week period to maintain the focus of the process.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on this research the following recommendations should be considered when implementing a collaborative process in the future:

1. The study could be implemented with a combination of special education and general education personnel. This would allow me to examine how perceptions of special education and general education personnel are similar and different in regard to the collaborative process.

2. The development of a collaborative team that combines special education and general education personnel with an emphasis on inclusion practices could also be an area of future research.
3. Another recommendation for future study would be to interview the professional personnel in the special education department that are non-Research and Development Team participants to obtain their perspectives on what personnel on the team can do to help them better serve students in their classroom and enjoy the learning process.
4. A survey on the subject of job satisfaction involving Research and Development Team participants and those who have not participated would be of interest in order to compare possible similarities and differences.
5. Recommendations suggested for implementation by the Research and Development Team should be included for future research.

Conclusion

The uniqueness of this collaborative group adds to the significance of the research for school administrators who are searching for effective methods of staff development. The design of the Research and Development Team is distinctive in that nowhere else in my examination of literature is there a school system conducting a summer work session using the approach and specific focus of the Research and Development Team. In member checking conducted by me, team members identified several important and unique features:

1. The number of years of experience this professionally diverse group brings to the work sessions is exceptional. The inclusion of system-wide personnel who work side by side with classroom teachers enables each group to develop an understanding and appreciation for each individual's working and learning style.

2. The quality and depth of the resources have improved each year as the team improves their skills and expertise.
3. Professionals responsible for development of the products are the ones who are going to be using them. As a result, these products present solutions to real life problems identified by the team members that creates immediate acceptance of the products. In addition this group acts not just as a *think tank* that discusses ideas but acts as a cooperative that produces authentic materials.
4. Team members now generate the task list to be focused upon each year, a total reversal of the top-down manner in which the task list was originally generated.
5. An environment has been created that allows for consensus-building and creative brain storming. The team members feel free to speak out without fear of reprisal, problem-solve, feel free to ask questions, and make team-driven decisions. The use of the collaborative process facilitates communication between disciplines, formation of close relationships, and an enhanced appreciation of other points of view.
6. Team members expressed their appreciation that I had enough trust in their ability that I was able to relinquish control over the group and allow them the freedom to set procedures, develop new products, and make recommendations for departmental changes.
7. The team members are from different schools within the county and act as their own ambassadors and salespersons of the process and products they produce. They also act as a liaison between other personnel and the team, bringing ideas, suggestions, and problems for the team's consideration.

8. The team's ability to work during the summer allows them the opportunity to work without interruption. The ability to directly focus on specific issues for 2 weeks enhances the process.
9. The Research and Development Team facilitator's background in literacy gives her the opportunity to teach mini lessons which are designed to improve reading instruction and use of authentic text.

Participants in the research experienced empowerment, new leadership skills, increased knowledge of curriculum and current research, increased expertise and use of technology, demonstrated analytical abilities, enhanced time management and organizational skills, and exhibited collaborative skills and interpersonal relationships. Of the participants interviewed, 100% expressed an increase in job satisfaction by being a participant on the team. Additional areas participants expressed were better understanding of my role as a supervisor, awareness of expertise in others, and receiving increased respect from school professionals. The Research and Development Team has been successful and the participants continue to have a bond with the other participants that foster a climate of creative skill development. All participants agreed that the Research and Development Team is a valuable component of the special education department in Roane County Schools. Participants expressed that the team experiences and products they developed during the 2-week work sessions established consistency within the department and were vital to the department's success. The camaraderie and friendships that have developed along with diverse thinking through the process are positive outcomes. I concluded that the special education participants have developed professional growth and skill development as a member of the team but more importantly the morale, job satisfaction,

empowerment, and self-confidence they have experienced as a participant on the Research and Development Team will contribute to student success.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Email Letter to Participants

January, 2010

Dear Research and Development Team Members,

I am a doctoral student at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis. I am currently writing my dissertation on Professional Growth of Special Education Personnel Through the Use of a Collaborative Process. I would like to know if you would be interested in being part of the research study.

The intent of this study is to examine how special education personnel perceive their professional growth and skill development as a result of participation on a collaborative team. As a willing participant, I will ask you questions pertaining to your views of skill development, commitment to the team, strengths and weakness of the team, factors for success and lack of success of the team, comparison to other staff developments, and least favorable and favorable experiences as a team member. Eight participants will be selected for the focus group session and can expect to spend about two hours at a school location during the work day being interviewed and recorded. All participants will be asked to participate in a personal interview at their school site, which will be recorded and last about one hour. Participants may withdraw their data at the end of their participation if they decide that they did not want to participate.

Participants' identity and personal information will be kept confidential. By participating in this study, you will be giving me permission to quote you. Your name will not be used in any

form when quoting. You will have the opportunity to review a draft copy of your statements. The results will be published in a dissertation document.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw your participation at any time. If you are interested in learning more, please respond to this email within the next five school days.

Sincerely yours,

Stephanie Walker

Appendix B
Email Response to Participants

January, 2010

Dear Research and Development Team Members,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research study. The introductory session will take place in the computer lab at the Midtown Educational Center (date to be decided). At this session the intent of the study will be explained, you will be asked to sign an informed consent form, and be allowed to ask questions about the research. Eight participants will be asked to remain for the focus group session which will take place at the completion of the introductory session. An interviewer will also schedule personal interviews at the completion of the introductory session. Again thank you for your time in participating in this research study.

Stephanie Walker

Appendix C
Informed Consent

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Stephanie S. Walker

TITLE OF PROJECT: Professional Growth of Special Education Personnel Through the Use of a Collaborative Process

EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

INFORMED CONSENT

I wish to thank you for your willingness to participate in this focus group/personal interview session. This data collection activity would not be possible without your help.

You have volunteered to participate in a research study to evaluate your professional growth as a result of a collaborative process. As stated, your participation is strictly voluntary. You may leave at any time, refuse to answer any question, or ask to have your data removed from the research without penalty or prejudice.

This Informed Consent will explain about being a participant in a research study. It is important that you read this material carefully and then decide if you wish to be a volunteer.

PURPOSE

The intent of the case study is to examine to what degree educational personnel perceive their professional growth and skill development as a result of participation in a collaborative team of special education personnel.

DURATION

You have been invited to participate in a focus group session with special education personnel and the focus group researcher and a personal interview with a facilitator. These sessions will last approximately two hours. The duration of the data collection and analysis phases of this study will be during the school year 2009-2010.

PROCEDURES

The procedures, which will involve you as a research subject, include:

Your participation in this research study is to engage in a focus group and personal interview and conversation about your professional growth as a result of your participation on the Research and Development Team. The focus group session and personal interview will be audio tape recorded.

At the end of the data collection and analysis, I may ask that you read your responses to ensure the research findings are reflective of your thoughts and experiences.

Your truthful and collegial participation on the focus group panel is very important to the accuracy of this research. Therefore, I reserve the right to request that you leave the focus group session if your behavior becomes detrimental to the data collection process.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES/TREATMENTS

There are no alternatives.

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Stephanie S. Walker

TITLE OF PROJECT: Professional Growth of Special Education Personnel Through the Use of a Collaborative Process

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

The possible risks and/or discomforts of your involvement include:

The possible risks for participating in the focus group and personal interview are minimal and would be compared to the risks you are exposed to in normal conversation with a group. However, the very act of asking you to think about and discuss a topic such as your professional growth may cause you some embarrassment or discomfort. If you experience discomfort due to the intent of the questions, you have the right to withdraw from the focus group discussion or personal interview at your convenience.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS

The possible benefits of your participation are:

Participants engaged in a personal interview and focus group session typically report the therapeutic value of that participation. This is your opportunity to share your thoughts in a format that encourages your participation and celebrates your unique lived experiences. I intend to share the findings of this research.

FINANCIAL COSTS

The possible financial costs to you as a participant in this research study are:

There will be no cost to you as I have made every effort to locate the research during the day at your assigned school.

COMPENSATION IN THE FORM OF PAYMENTS TO RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

You will not receive compensation for this activity.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this research experiment is voluntary. You may refuse to participate. You can quit at any time. You may quit by calling Stephanie S. Walker, whose phone number is 865-717-5463. You will be told immediately if any of the results of the study should reasonably be expected to make you change your mind about staying in the study.

Your only participation in this research is participating in a focus group session, personal interview, and reading your responses to your personal interview to ensure that your story is communicated accurately. These activities during the course of the study may influence your decision to continue your participation.

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Stephanie S. Walker

TITLE OF PROJECT: Professional Growth of Special Education Personnel Through the Use of a Collaborative Process

There are no anticipated negative consequences of your withdrawal from this study. This includes your right to withdraw your data once you have read the final research report prior to the publication of that report.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

If you have any questions, problems or research-related medical problems at any time, you may call the Chairman of the Institutional Review Board at 423-439-6054 for any questions you may have about your rights as a research subject. If you have any questions or concerns about the research and want to talk to someone independent of the research team or you can't reach the study staff, you may call an IRB Coordinator at 423-439-6055 or 423-439-6002.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. A copy of the records from this study will be stored in Stephanie S. Walker's home safe, which is kept locked at all times, for at least five years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a subject or using any identifiable labels when directly quoting your words in a manuscript or presentation. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, ETSU IRB and personnel particular to this research have access to the study records. Those personnel include the following individuals and their roles in the research: Peer Examiners Dr. Kay Grantham and Betty Blanton, Chairman Dr. Pam Scott, Interviewers Nell Bilbrey and Alisa Smith, Transcriber Marcia Seaman and Editor Dr. David Timbs. Records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above.

By signing below, you confirm that you have read or had this document read to you. You will be given a signed copy of this informed consent document. You have been given the chance

to ask questions and to discuss your participation with the investigator. You freely and voluntarily choose to be in this research project.

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT DATE

PRINTED NAME OF PARTICIPANT DATE

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER DATE

SIGNATURE OF INTERVIEWER DATE

Appendix D
Focus Group Interview Guide

I. Introduction

A. Welcome Participants

B. The intent of my study and our meeting today is to examine how you, special education personnel participating on a collaborative team perceive any ways that the team and your participation on it have changed outcomes for yourselves as individuals and professional team participants, and for special education students. Some of the outcomes may have been positive and others less so. My goal is to understand how you view the team.

C. Sign Informed Consent Form – Researcher will ask each interviewee to read and sign the informed consent form. A copy of the signed form will be given to the interviewee.

D. I would like to thank you for your willingness to join this focus group session. During the session, I will ask you questions about your participation as a member of the Research and Development Team. I will use your words to make interpretations about the professional growth and skill development of special education personnel as a result of participation on a collaborative team. My goal is to provide the findings from this study for school administrators to use in planning for professional growth and skill development. Therefore, your participation in this study is critically important. Your words, and the resulting findings, will help in understanding the value of collaboration and

teamwork. So your candor will benefit the quality of my research and ultimately academic outcomes for special education students. I assure you that your participation in this study will remain anonymous. I may decide to quote you in the dissertation. I will not use your name in association with these quotes, nor will I use any identifiers that might link you to your words. This session should take approximately two hours. I will be tape-recording this session to have an accurate record of your comments. Do you have any questions before I begin the tape recorder?

- E. I will turn on the tape recorder and ask if she has their permission to tape record this session.

II. Interview Questions

1. What is or are the purpose(s) of the Research and Development Team?
2. What is or are the purpose(s) of the summer work sessions?
3. Has your participation on the Research and Development Team benefited you? How?
4. Has your participation benefited the district?
5. Has your participation impacted special education students? How?
6. What have you learned as a result of participation on the Research and Development Team?
7. How has your participation on the Research and Development Team impacted your teaching of special education students?
8. What have been the difficult elements of service on the Research and Development Team?

9. In your opinion are there ways the Research and Development Team can improve its work?
10. What factors contribute to the success of the Research and Development Team process?
11. When looking back on your participation on the Research and Development Team, how does it compare to other staff development that the school system provides?

III. Conclusion

- A. Based on the information that you have given me, I will summarize your comments in this way: (researcher will summarize). Is this correct? Please remember that my research findings will be included in my dissertation. Based on your thoughts about collaboration, what should I emphasize in my dissertation?
- B. That concludes our session. Do you have any additional comments before I stop the tape recorder?
- C. Turn off the tape recorder.
- D. Again, I wish to thank you for your participation in this research study.

Appendix E
Personal Interview Guide

I. Introduction

- A. Statement of Intent: The intent of this study is to exam how special education personnel perceive their professional growth and skill development as a result of participation on a collaborative team in Roane County Schools in east Tennessee.
- B. IRB letter of informed consent.
- C. The interviewer will turn on the tape recorder and ask if she has their permission to tape record this session.

II. Interview Questions

- 1. How has your participation on the collaborative team impacted you?
- 2. Has participation on the team impacted others? How?
- 3. Has participation contributed to your learning? How?
- 4. Has participation on the team contributed to the learning of other team members?
- 5. How does your participation on the team make you feel as an individual and a professional?
- 6. How do you feel about continuing to participate on the Research and Development Team?
- 7. Can you share experiences about your participation on the team that were pleasant, surprising, and happy?
- 8. Can you share experiences about your participation on the team that were unpleasant and unhappy?

9. Have your views about the team changed over time?
10. Has the collaborative team contributed to improving instruction to meet the needs of our special education population? How?
11. In what ways can the team do a better job of meeting the needs of students?

III. Conclusion

- A. It is essential that I have an accurate portrayal of your statements. Please allow me to summarize your comments. Please correct anything that I have misinterpreted, misunderstood or misquoted. Is this correct? Please remember that the research findings will be included in Stephanie Walker's dissertation.
- B. That concludes our session. Do you have any additional comments before I stop the tape recorder?
- C. Turn off the tape recorder.
- D. Again, I wish to thank you for your participation in this research study.

Appendix F
Document Review Guide

Document Title:

Type of Document:

Date of Document:

Date Retrieved:

Location of Document:

Document Review Questions:

1. How was the agenda organized and what was the rationale for developing it in that manner?
2. How was the team organized to meet the agenda's goals?
3. What were the major accomplishments as a result?

VITA

STEPHANIE SMITH WALKER

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 Marital Status: Married
- Education: Public Schools, Harriman, Tennessee
 B.S. Home Economics, East Tennessee State University, Johnson
 City, Tennessee 1975
 M.S. Home Economics/Special Education, University of
 Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee 1978
 Ed.S. Administration Supervision, Tennessee Technological
 University, Cookeville, Tennessee, 1988
 Ed.D. Educational Leadership, East Tennessee State University,
 Johnson City, Tennessee 2010
- Professional Experience: Teacher, Roane County Schools; Kingston, Tennessee, 1975-1994

 Special Education Supervisor, Roane County Schools; Kingston,
 Tennessee, 1995 to present
- Honors and Awards: Tennessee Association of Administrators in Special Education,
 East Tennessee Special Education Supervisor of the Year,
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