What is our story of collaboration within a distributed leadership team: What is working and why? A look at a cross-curricular team using collaboration to enhance student learning

by

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Abstract

Working on a team purposefully formed by formal leaders to better support students’ first year in high school as well as allow team members to work collaboratively to deliver this program inspired me to research the perspective of this B.C. team. This qualitative study was designed to explore the team’s story of collaboration. I used both participant surveys and focus group research to capture the team’s definitions of its successes and challenges. At the same time, the study reviewed the team and formal leaders’ choice to use a distributive leadership model. The literature internationally points to collaboration amongst teachers as a way to help them better meet students’ learning needs, better help support each other’s professional growth and at the same time take risks to innovate their practice to better ensure all students spend the year learning. Moreover, the literature suggests that having teachers take ownership of change helps focus the work on the needs of students and invigorates teachers’ job satisfaction. Such efforts, according to the literature, require a balance between the work of formal leaders and teachers to make collaboration work. Both the survey and focus group data sets along with the researcher’s own field notes were analysed for common themes. Linking the literature to the emerging themes about collaboration and distributive leadership reinforced that such collaborative opportunities, when teacher-driven, enrich student learning and teachers’ excitement for their job. Like all recipes, the team said the prescription for collaboration requires careful attention to subtle details and the overall blend of the ingredients. The researcher noted that the ideas of individual commitment, a common focus on improving learning for students, a chance to innovate and the members comfort with challenges inherent in collaboration drove the success they described.

**Key words:** teacher collaboration, distributed leadership, innovation, professional development, job satisfaction, student learning, formal leadership support, collaborative teams.
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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Teacher collaboration has been discussed in the education literature for at least twenty years, touting positive perspectives and the need to continue to explore what makes it work. With an appreciative inquiry lens, I will explore the connections and underlying forces that support collaborative work amongst a cross-curricular team of Grade 8 teachers focused on collaborating in a team using distributed leadership. This team, operating in British Columbia is also absorbing recent changes to the curriculum to encourage a focus on skills, understanding and knowledge along with foundational Core Competencies looking at Communication, Thinking and Personal and Social Responsibility. To address these changes, I have enjoyed collaborating with a cross-curricular team co-constructed by administration and the teaching staff. The formal leaders in the school created an administrative structure that allowed the teachers in the Grade 8 program to lead the new initiative and distribute the leadership amongst the team members. Given the positive work atmosphere, the willingness of members to learn from each other and the continued creation of practical artefacts (lessons linked to the Core Competencies, units, events, assessment protocols and cross-curricular inquires), I wanted to understand what elements were working for other members and how our work related to the literature on teacher collaboration. My purpose for comparing the views of my teammates, myself and the literature was to seek the potential value of creating such working environments for others, and to define elements that offered the best chance of success in other settings.

Context of the Study

With an appreciative inquiry lens, I will explore the connections and underlying forces that support collaborative work amongst a cross-curricular team of Grade 8 teachers focused on
collaborating in a team using distributed leadership. Our collective focus is to create a powerful high school transition year, where teachers focus on students’ learning needs first and curriculum second. At the same time, the context of educating students is changing at the provincial and district level. The Province of British Columbia’s new curriculum, with its increased focus on concepts and skills versus fact memorization, became mandatory for Kindergarten through Grade 9 in September 2016. Beyond the change in curricular content, the government established Core Competencies as the curriculum’s foundation, including Communication, Thinking and Personal and Social Responsibility. While students are meant to self-assess their specific abilities under these broad headings, classroom teachers need to scaffold the ability to self-assess and recognize in students’ learning their ability to acquire and demonstrate these competencies. In July 2016, the Ministry also introduced an Interim Student Reporting Guidelines document requiring districts to move towards standards-based reporting with a greater focus on written reporting comments (July 1, 2016).

In response to these provincial requirements, the school district in which the team works developed assessment and reporting policies designed to meet the Interim Guidelines. These significant shifts in policy, curricular requirements, and assessment practices offered further impetus for the school and past Grade 8 teachers to start building a linear Grade 8 program. The goal was to use collaborative inquiry to explore how we could build on the spirit of the new education context to offer Grade 8s the best transition into high school possible. This program change occurred within a more traditional high school that serves about 1400 students from Grade 8 through Grade 12. The students typically move through four course blocks in a day, with the blocks rotating each day. Timetabling for Grade 8 instruction began to look different in 2013.
I am moving into my third year as a Grade 8 teacher in this school, two years into a move to linear course delivery for Grade 8 academics. Prior to my arrival at the school, teachers travelled to other schools to explore options for reform. Grade 8s were put into a linear Humanities course in the 2014-2015 school year as well as a linear delivery of Science and Math, though the latter two did not always occur with the same teacher. At the end of the 2015-2016 school year, the then principal met with interested Grade 8 teachers to discuss building a new timetable model to facilitate linear instruction in all academic classes and to foster collaborative practices. The meetings led to a design where Grade 8 students would continue to be podded into groups of 75 to 80. A class of 25 Grade 8s would have the same Humanities teacher; Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) teacher; Healthy Living teacher and French teacher. These three or four teachers would work with the same 75 students throughout the year. The teachers participating in the Grade 8 program agreed to be ‘all in,’ teaching only Grade 8 students for the majority of their assignment. At the same time, the timetable was adjusted to ensure that most of the academic teachers received the fourth block of the day as their preparatory (prep) time for two out of the year’s four terms. When the Grade 8 academic teachers had their prep block, the students moved to their elective block, moving out of the pod structure and into a traditional class grouping – a timetable built on their elective choice. In alternating terms, some Grade 8 teachers engaged in support blocks in Math and Literacy with students identified using a Response to Intervention (RTI) model.

At the end of our third year of the Grade 8 team working together, the teacher leadership in the building shifted in response to changes at the school district level. At the same time, the current teacher leader for the Grade 8 program retired. Now called a Learning Leader model,
leaders are expected to help their teams focus on big questions around assessment, communication, differentiation, curriculum implementation, and reconciliation. A change in how we looked at leadership in our Grade 8 program was a natural fall out of the shift. Current members of the team recommitted to the 2017-2018 year, with even fewer teachers taking on the roles. Like the STEM and Humanities teachers, the French and Healthy Living teachers all accepted a post that saw them teaching French for a week and Healthy Living for a week to the same pod of 75 students. The team shrunk to eleven teachers from fourteen. With the smaller team, most teachers have common prep time for two out of the four terms. Finally, the team decided they preferred to move to a flatter organization where no one person served as a Learning Leader. Instead, one member applied to the post as a facilitator and conduit for the team into the leadership structure of the school and the district. The normal release time for the leader would be shared amongst the team for release days when one or more members were working on a project on behalf of the team. Our formal leadership agreed to this format.

Purpose of the Study

Working within this collaborative structure, writing for external audiences about it and sharing the work at conferences has elicited a common response from audiences: why is this working and how can other groups make collaboration support teaching and learning in their building? My perception was that working as part of a collaborative team was enriching my instructional practice. I felt more capable of taking risks to improve my ability to meet the needs of a diverse classroom. I also felt more confident making the changes needed to implement the new curriculum and assessment practice mandated by the province. At the same time, I felt answering this question depended on understanding what the collaborative team thought was the
source of their success, the potential pitfalls and the key strategies to make collaboration work for teachers and students. Without the team’s perspective, I did not feel it was possible to describe the framework that could make collaborative practice extend to other locations. Likewise, my own positive experience might cloud pitfalls that others could see with more clarity. With a more encompassing definition of success, one that honoured the team itself, the potential for sharing and supporting other educators to build a collaborative model that worked in different contexts seemed more likely. In addition, the formal process of reviewing the current literature on collaboration, seeking areas of correlation and those of deviation with my team’s perceptions would strengthen any sharing initiative. Finally, the ability to collaborate in the way our team does requires financial support, administrative support and hiring support by formal leadership and the district. To justify their continued support, understanding why it enhances teacher practice and student learning would be helpful. From this desire to share and inspire others that collaboration improves student learning and the professional practice of teachers, I began my journey to understand the team’s shared story of collaboration within a distributed leadership team, to ask what is working and why and to take a closer look at a cross-curricular team using collaboration to enhance student learning.

**Justification of the Study**

Being part of this Grade 8 team has re-energized my excitement for teaching. Designing and implementing this study was an opportunity to explore how our collaborative team works as an example of distributed leadership. The model fits with a Community of Practice (CofPs) framework identified in Emergence Theory (Wheatley & Frieze, 2006). The second stage of emergence is the building of communities of practice which is people who identify that working
together builds new knowledge in their practice. Wheatley and Frieze (2006) also point to the importance of commitment within the community, commitment to one another in the effort to serve the needs of others. Their studies show a more rapid growth of knowledge amongst members in these CofPs and the next stage in their pioneering efforts is building a system of influence. The importance of understanding how this emerging team works and nuances that impact its work is supported by research on collaborative teams. Wheatley and Frieze (2006) suggest understanding how emergence happens offers leaders a chance to better foster its growth. Little (2003) points to the limited research on the specific interactions and driving forces that occur within a professional community of teachers that seek to innovate and learn. She found that innovation and learning are key to improving the practice of team members and this research could show if these dynamics are also present within the team. More recent research by Butler, Schnellert, and MacNeil (2015) speak to the limited knowledge about what circumstances are required in a “community of inquiry…to inspire, support, sustain and coordinate educators’ investment in systems-level change” (p. 1). In their extended case study, they looked at how a three-year adolescent literacy improvement initiative across a district’s secondary schools might inspire and sustain system-level innovation. The potential for inquiry to create a context for collaboration drove their study, where they analyzed program documents, field notes and interviews of the formal leaders and teachers involved in the program. While my study only looks at a small context -- a school versus a school system, it too looks at teacher inquiry as a method of collaboration and a way to create innovative programming.

Understanding the driving forces behind our program and collaborative work as well as spreading information about this kind of distributed working relationship also has value from a
student achievement focus. Research by Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) makes the case that collaboration like that of the Grade 8 team supports student learning improvements. They state that student learning improvements happen when professional development is ongoing, connected to practice, focused on student learning, aligned with school goals and priorities, collaborative and collegial, and sustained over time (p. 6). At four years of growth as a program and year two of collaborative time built into the teaching day, the longevity of the team’s work is starting to fit with the successful model explored by Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009).

As noted earlier, the leadership model for all teacher leaders shifted in the district. By agreeing to have our Learning Leader serve as facilitator for the team, we moved to a model resembling that of distributed leadership. Distributive leadership, according to Timperley (2006), “comprises dynamic interactions between multiple leaders and followers” (p. 2). She argues that leadership is distributed across task responsibilities versus the traditional hierarchy of a specific leader-follower model. Timperley’s (2006) definition corresponds with the stated vision of the team members at the end of June 2017. We wanted different team members to lead different team initiatives, letting them focus their energies on those areas where they felt the most commit. She also noted that “on-the-ground observations are essential” (p. 4) to developing the concepts of distributive leadership. And in her conclusions she added that the transformation of leadership she observed “could not be understood if leadership traits, behaviours, tasks, or artefacts had been analysed separately” (p. 22). To understand what works when looking at leadership change according to Timperley (2006), researchers need to look at the interplay of all activities within a particular context. Such was my goal with this research.
Research Question and Hypotheses

Studying what makes our Grade 8 team work and what gets in our way offers an opportunity to inspire other such collaborative models. To do this I asked: *What is our story of collaboration in a distributed leadership team? What is working and why?* I had a hunch the feedback I received would support the literature regarding the need for the team to be voluntary (Meirink et al., 2010; Owen, 2015). In addition, I believed participants would speak to the opportunity to innovate; to take risks as new curriculum, instructional practice, and assessment practice was implemented; to scaffold the Ministry of Education’s Core Competencies; and to engage in on-going professional learning – all characteristics supported by the literature as key to professional learning communities in innovative contexts (Owen, 2015). My belief was that the team saw their work as supporting student learning, but I did not know what parameters they might use to define positive academic and social-emotional growth in students. I hoped to explore the breadth of the team’s definition of success as we explored our experiences together. As noted earlier, the team members working in the school in the spring of 2017 sought and received approval from formal leadership to move to a distributed leadership model. While Timperley (2006) notes that school reform cannot be built on the strength of an exceptional leader, she also points to the challenges of distributed leadership: “increasing the distribution of leadership is only desirable if the quality of the leadership activities contributes to assisting teachers to provide more effective instruction to their students” (p. 23). Noting the team’s views on its ability to focus on improved instruction would be important as the team tells its story. Defining the kind of team we are and the team’s view on distributed leadership would help translate the collaborative story for other teachers in the building and beyond who would like to learn from our efforts.
My current involvement in the team and the opportunity to hear informal remarks on the team’s progress led me to believe that members’ perceptions of their efficacy would shape their definition of their success. In their research to define teacher efficacy, Tschannen-Moran, Hoy and Hoy (1998) state that efficacy incorporates both an element of personal and general teaching efficacy. Self-efficacious teachers demonstrate a higher motivation, greater effort, and persistence in the face of classroom challenges. Most importantly, the authors say collaboration supports the development of efficacy (p. 239). In their longitudinal study on teachers collaborating to implement a district reading initiative, Butler et al. (2015) concluded that “encouraging educators’ engagement in inquiry initiatives can nurture self-efficacy” (p. 21) and support further collaborative work. Bandura (2000) says a group’s success in shaping their collective direction “lies partly in a shared sense of efficacy to bring their collective influence to bear on matters over which they can have some command” (p. 78). Finally, I suspected that professional autonomy and its role in members’ engagement would be put into question. Building collaboration is not always a smooth process; a few teachers see the process as counter to teacher autonomy. While some argue that autonomy is an opportunity to close doors and do as one pleases, the literature suggests a definition that blends individual responsibilities with the need to reflect and collaborate with peers (Naylor, 2011). Balancing the individual and collective, I suspected, would play a role in the team’s definition of success.

**Definition of Terms**

**Collaborate.** For the purposes of this research, I used the Merriam-Webster definition of collaborate: “to work jointly with others or together, especially in an intellectual endeavour.” By using the pronoun our, I included the views of myself and the other team members.
Story. The definition of story in this context was the members’ understanding of what makes collaboration work and what gets in the way. It extended into how members perceived their own learning and growth as professionals, as well as their views on what such collaboration did for the social and emotional growth and learning of their Grade 8 students.

Distributive Collaborative Team. In this context, I defined such a team as one that decided on initiatives in a collective manner. The team used its common preparation time, the district-provided Professional Learning Community time, professional development days, and occasionally staff’s personal time to collaborate on initiatives. The purpose, direction and content of those initiatives was agreed to by the collective team. Some details of projects were fleshed out by a few members in service of the entire team; however, those details were reviewed, adapted and agreed to before other members were required to implement them – for example, a student conference, a lesson, parent communication or a field trip. Likewise, the team collectively agreed on a plan to roll out learning initiatives like ePortfolios and cross-curricular units, with some classes doing different elements of a project so all students engaged in the learning, but the location was different for each class of 25 children – STEM or Humanities or French. Likewise, teachers of common curriculum developed units together; however, in the classroom individual approaches were unique despite similar or the same content.

Collaborative Inquiry. For the purpose of this research the inquiry process referred to the Spiral of Inquiry defined by Halbert and Kaser (2013). The team used the inquiry process for its own professional growth as well as to frame inquiry-based instruction for students.

Self-efficacy. With this term, I am referring to Bandura’s (1994) definition: “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise
influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave” (p. 71). I planned to listen for comments that reflected participants’ sense of improved ability to execute their professional duties as well as improved confidence.

**Professional autonomy.** In my research about this term, I found Hyslop-Margison and Sears’s (2010) definition most succinct: “professional autonomy entails not only self-determination, but professional responsibility toward colleagues as well” (p. 3). In his discussion paper for the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF), Naylor (2011) concluded that teacher autonomy involves exercising judgement in the context of the students’ needs as situated within the school, district and provincial requirements. He also stated that autonomy is built when teachers reflect personally and collectively, move to public spaces, and collaborate with peers.

**Brief Overview of Study**

With ethics and district approval in place, I conducted individual surveys of the 10 participants in November, attempting to establish their view about our collaboration early in the school year. Each participant filled in the four survey questions independently. I did not interview them. I did, with their approval, keep field notes periodically recording reflections as an inside observer, noting specifically how the participants interacted with each other, formal leadership supports, protocols and general questions about the different levels of engagement by participants. Finally, I worked with a facilitator to run a focus group in mid-March. The focus group questions, developed from my reading of the literature, extended more deeply into questions about the team’s collaborative work, their insight on the work’s impact on student
learning, the participants’ definitions of success and their ideas about challenges, and finally what they felt was needed to initiate collaboration amongst other teacher groups. I used all the data to define themes and ascertain participants’ views on the factors that are working and the areas that still need the team’s attention to sustain and share this collaborative practice. From these themes I wrote the story of collaboration.
Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Setting a Professional Context for the Research

As I stated in Chapter One, part of the purpose of this thesis was to situate the team’s collaboration within the context of other literature on teacher collaboration and distributed leadership. To create the environment to share our efforts with other professionals, other teachers and formal leaders interested in building a collaborative team would need to understand similarities or differences in how my team looks at collaboration as compared to the work deemed as successful by other researchers. I explored the literature within some key themes: types of professional collaboration, the linking of collaboration with innovation, the impacts of professional collaboration both on teachers’ practice and student learning, and the nature and value of distributed leadership as the glue to hold the initiative of teacher collaboration together.

Types of Professional Collaboration

Situating a label or name for our team within the literature on collaboration proves challenging as the literature offers many names for the ways in which teachers collaborate. Butler et al. (2015) researched communities of inquiry, building on Kaser and Halbert’s (2013) work to describe them: “teachers identify student needs, pose a question, develop criteria for monitoring progress, draw on resources to enhance their own learning and embed new powerful ideas in practice” (p. 2). Their definition ties with another found in the collaboration literature, Community of Practice (COP) defined by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 5). A COP has a shared area of interest, practice or role. They learn from each other, and conduct joint activities including solving problems or designing
new approaches to their craft. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) also points to a COP’s need for coordinators or facilitators, and that conflict and discussion of differences avoids the potential for group think. The notion of maintaining the COP until there is no longer interest (Wegner & Snyder, 2009) links to the teaching practice where such a freedom exists, versus the department team model of business. The Wegner-Trayner definition of COP runs parallel but is subtly different then Wheatley and Frieze’s (2006) Community of Practice, commonly referred to as CofP and at the heart of Emergence Theory. Within Emergence Theory, collaborative groups commit to working together to serve the needs of others, believing this builds new knowledge in their practice. However, while they emphasized the building of new knowledge for the CofP’s field, Wheatly and Frieze (2006) also emphasized the intentional practice of moving the community’s knowledge and discoveries to a wider audience. This definition fit with my desire to see what qualities of collaboration in my context could be shared with other teachers to support their efforts to implement change and program innovation. It suggests a role of sharing as well as collaborating.

Definitions of professional learning communities (PLC), another common term for collaboration, are more familiar in the education context because of work done by Richard DuFour and Solution Tree (http://www.allthingsplc.info/). In fact the formal collaboration time supplied by our district is called PLC time, with students dismissed early once a week to accommodate 45 minutes of teacher collaboration for the purpose of improving student learning. DuFour (2004) defines the PLC model using three big ideas: that the mission of formal education is to ensure students learn; that educators must work together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all students and that their effectiveness at this task is judged on the basis of
results, where students’ current achievement is measured and goals are set to improve the current level (DuFour, 2004). DuFour (2004) himself suggests the term is at risk of losing its meaning because it is used so ubiquitously. His definition speaks to school-wide missions, improved practice, and improved achievement by students. While the team speaks to seeing improvements in student understanding of concepts like inquiry and moving further along the grade level continuum, measuring achievement across all students as a point of comparison has not been part of the team’s work. Parsons (n.d.) suggests DuFour’s three key characteristics of a PLC “have stood the test of time” (p. 3). However, he encourages teachers to move beyond DuFour’s (2004) “ideas for the set rules for building a PLC or evaluating if a PLC was really a PLC” (p. 3).

O’Keefe (2012) decries the PLC experts’ “blithe confidence that meaningful collaboration can be coerced and efficiently managed” (p. 56). He argues that this clinical view of collaboration assumes that data crunching, attendance to a mission and vision statement defined by the larger organization, together with a slew of books and consultants can inspire innovation and change. Such forced collaboration reveals the “intractable” (p. 57) according to O’Keefe, and he further suggests being well versed in education research is necessary to “avoid frauds, fads and hustles motivated by profit, ideology or mere earnest intent” (p. 57). Not that collaboration gets a complete black eye from O’Keefe. He speaks to the kind of collaboration that brings teachers together with common ideas for curricular approaches, a similar need to learn, an innovative approach to supporting students and other quests spawned from teachers’ pursuits of their own core values within their own professional judgement. Says O’Keefe, “contrived collaboration, imposed and managed through hierarchy, is meaningless and paradoxical” (p. 57). Likewise, Hord, Meehan, Orletsky and Sattes (1999) define a PLC as having the principal sharing the leadership and a shared vision from staff.
Ubiquitous use, and an achievement focus that rings too close to standardization undermines the PLC title as a moniker for teachers focused on innovation. Despite that, the definition of teacher collaboration that encompasses all its positive notions sits under the title PLC and is forwarded by Owen (2015). She says the “PLC characteristics typically identified as successful in changing teacher beliefs and practices include collaborative work over an extended timeline, shared beliefs and vision, undertaking relevant practical activities, using an inquiry approach and learning focus, and guarding against insularity” (p. 58). Support from leaders to build the team’s capacity for leadership is also key. The notion of PLC also received a more positive spin when it is defined by Bloom and Vitcov (2010) as a culture of improving student achievement and collective efficacy built on trust, a group motivated to hold members accountable to one another, and an initiative participated in because of what professionals do versus what management demands. This picture, like that of Wheatley and Frieze’s (2006) Emergence Theory, inspired my desire to research my team, hoping to create B.C. based criteria around the collaboration to inspire continued support of collaborative time within the day and more groups such as ours. The label for our collaboration was hard to pinpoint in the literature. As Shakespeare would say, what is in a name? From the literature, the quality of collaboration, the joint commitment to student growth and achievement, teacher ownership, the construction of meaningful artefacts and the potential to grow collaboration lies more in the intent of the participants and formal leaders than in the title of the team.

**Professional Collaboration as Innovation**

Regardless of the title given collaboration, the traditional view of teaching, one teacher, one classroom and about thirty students undermines the idea of professional collaboration. The
isolated nature of caring for the education of those 18 to 30 students within a timetable designed to maximize a teacher’s interactions with the students could imply that collaboration is impossible. Poulos, Culberston, Piazza and D’Entremont (2014) conducted a year-long study of five Boston schools whose innovations had won them awards. Their quantitative research of teachers and formal leaders and qualitative interviews, teacher logs and site visits led to a comprehensive look at collaboration. They suggest teacher collaboration receives little attention in policy discussions because it is so hard to achieve. Yet Owen (2015) paraphrases her own research of 2012 saying “teachers need to be facilitators of learning, co-learners and negotiators…working with colleagues in new ways such as interdisciplinary teams” (p. 58). Her case study of three innovative school settings, as defined by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development involved semi-structured interviews and focus groups involving teachers and leaders. Owen (2015) asked questions about changing the role of teachers, methods of school-based professional learning and the importance of professional learning and PLCs in supporting innovation. The notion that collaboration linked with innovation in both Poulos et al. 2014) and Owen (2015) was a theme I wanted to explore, and these studies found teacher collaboration in was linked with the idea of innovation, a word that can be associated with upheaval, transformation, breakthrough and ingenuity. Owen (2015) looked at teacher collaboration in part because she wanted to understand what actions lead to building an innovative school context and found that professional learning occurred throughout the day in both a formal and informal context where members were involved in action research or inquiry teams. Likewise, my experience was that professional learning was easier in a positive collaboration environment, and I hoped to discover the views of the participants.
Little (2003) calls this a professional community focused on innovating and learning. At the same time, Little’s is a cautionary tale, one that speaks to the need for more subtle understandings of teacher collaboration. Even where collaboration and innovation exist, Little found “the force of tradition…simultaneously and complexly at play in the teachers’ everyday talk” (p. 940). Thus, Little says to truly situate teacher collaboration in a place of innovation to improve student learning, we must understand the “interplay of the conventional and the creative” (p. 941) in collaborative teacher teams. Staying mindful of the potential challenges and finding out participants’ context for these would be key in my own research.

**Professional Collaboration Creating Professional Learning and Job Satisfaction**

Besides the importance of collaboration in creating enhancements for students, the literature indicates that collaboration improves the job satisfaction of teachers. In school leader interviews Owen (2015) found that “…responsibility to the team, reinvigorating passion for teaching and developing deep understanding through shared work were some of the advantages of collaboration” (p. 8). Again this reinvigorating passion for teaching was something I perceived would be part of the participants’ view, if it paralleled mine. Growing professionally and taking risks because of collaboration was another element I suspected would be part of the participants’ context. In his look at collaboration to support teachers’ opportunities to transform their learning, Steyn (2017) also found such efforts to work together built a feeling of togetherness and revived one teacher’s motivation for the job. His South African research was built on an open-ended questionnaire and individual interviews of Mathematics teachers and principals over a two-year period. The open-ended nature of his research designed “to allow participants to express their perceptions of their learning experiences in teams … [and] to
understand the world in which participants worked and also added richness and rigour from the perspective of participants” (p. 6). This inspired my thinking around my survey and focus group questions, ensuring that the participants could more effectively reflect their opinion. According to Steyn (2017) his participants suggested it was their interdependency and collaborative ownership of learning that built passion for the work. Sharing responsibilities was also high on their list of successful outcomes with the teachers noting it “lessens our work pressure and provides more time for other responsibilities” (p. 9). This was also my experience, and I keyed in on this issue for my research documents so as to understand how my colleagues perceived the time impact of collaboration.

Interdependence also featured in Meirink et al.’s (2010) results. His team looked at five interdisciplinary teams in five Dutch schools and compared the interactions and topics of collaboration. They also conducted a questionnaire before and after the collaborative teams were developed to understand what the teachers felt they learned. The teams defined successful collaboration using the term interdependence. For them interdependence meant moving beyond just sharing ideas to having all members play a role creating concrete artefacts, lesson plans and assignments that could be used by others (p. 176). The co-creation of practical artefacts and the importance of that to improving job satisfaction and defining success in collaboration was another concept I looked to tease out in my research instruments and further reinforced by Dever and Lash (2013), and Naylor (2011). Dever and Lash (2013) noted that job-embedded collaboration builds connections to real-world problems and professional development that is applicable to the needs of the teachers and students in the context of the classroom. They also report that “when collaboration was positive, it yielded strong outcomes such as resource
sharing, assessment creation and unit planning” (p. 16). When it wasn’t positive, Dever and Lash (2013) saw minimal attendance and minimal participation. For collaboration to be successful, teachers who collaborate need to feel they are driving the improvements for their students’ learning and their own learning in a trusting environment. Job satisfaction through collaboration plays a role in Naylor’s (2011) study into professional autonomy: “the value placed on autonomy by teachers appears to be identified along with value placed on community and relationships, suggesting that many teachers thrive in a combination of autonomous decision-making within a supportive community” (p. 16). Again, the quality of collaboration lies more in the intent of the participants and leaders. Parsons (n.d) compares collaborative professional learning to a block party, where teachers build on relationships to work and learn together (p. 1). The picture he paints of the party includes “teachers shar[ing] with each other towards building a common vision with learning as the primary goal and constantly assess[ing] their success” (p. 1). This party was the one I saw; my research needed to determine if participants shared my image.

Professional Collaboration and Improved Student Learning

In the literature, the desire to innovate professional practice for the sake of improving learning drives the discussion around teacher collaboration. Butler et al. (2015) note that “engagement in practice, and in change efforts, often involves individuals coming together in risk, goal-oriented collaborative relationships” (p. 8). The goals, they say, need to be improved outcomes for students to ensure the strongest focus and engagement by teacher collaborators. Frost and Durrant (2002) say collaboration amongst teachers moves innovation beyond the classroom by creating the social capital to encourage teachers’ colleagues to join their work and extend the results. Likewise, Palmer (2007) speaks to the role collaboration plays in moving
educators away from the isolated teacher and enhancing professionalism by saying that “the growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it” (p. 148). Teachers perceived that “co-planning and co-teaching led to more active and creative materials being used in the classroom,” according to Owen (2015), and the teachers tied the improved achievement on a similar assessment task to these more active student learning approaches (p. 65). The same teachers also attributed improved student engagement and self-regulation to the teachers’ collective innovations. While some may see the act of collaboration as creating more work, the literature points to job satisfaction through the sharing of the planning and teaching, something I suspected was at play for many participants.

Collaboration can also be accused of undermining the delicate balance of professional autonomy. In the literature, the key behind dealing with this balance of collaboration and professional autonomy seems to be determined by the definition of autonomy and its boundaries. The notion of collaborating to improve student learning and innovate professionally ties to the definition of teacher autonomy. When discussing the improvement of teacher performance, Hyslop-Margison and Sears (2010) focus on the role of professional autonomy, saying that building its strength improves the professionalism of teachers. They point to a need to reject standardization because it undermines accountability. Rather, leaders need to enhance collaborative networks because they can build a professional identity for the individuals and the profession. More importantly, they argue that “professional autonomy for teachers is not merely a fundamental requirement of quality education, but for creating students who become engaged and politically active democratic citizens” (p. 12). At the same time, I wanted my research to
give participants a chance to speak to collaboration’s impact on their practice whether that was a positive or negative impact on autonomy so as to understand their context.

For the team I was researching, the fundamental glue seemed to be a common desire to make Grade 8 students’ entry into high school more effective. The value of collaboration to make these improvements was held up in the literature. Beyond the philosophical look at the potential to improve students’ learning, a more concrete connection between teachers in learning communities and students’ improved learning was made in an extensive study looking at the restructuring of high schools. Lee, Smith and Croninger (1995) looked at the achievement data of 11,000 students in 820 secondary schools across the United States. Schools that implemented three or more restructuring practices posted higher academic gains, and the gains were equitable. The schools using professional learning communities to allow staff to work together saw class pedagogy change, students engaged in higher intellectual learning tasks and there were smaller achievement gaps between diverse groups. Likewise, Poulos, Culberston, Piazza and D’Entremont (2014) state that teacher collaboration is the driving force behind school improvement. To define the improvement, they used increased numbers of students “in Advanced Placement courses and performing well; students…getting into prestigious colleges and getting scholarships” (p. 16), but maybe even more telling was the increased academic rigor and more effective support of students’ learning needs that they cited. In Hattie’s (2015) look at what teachers do to ensure students enjoy a year of growth for every year of school, teacher collaboration topped the list of effective approaches with an effect size of 0.93. Even when improvements were not at the level a team hoped for, collaboration gave teachers a sense of control over the directions they needed to take according to Butler et al. (2015). Their results
stated that teachers’ efficacy grew from the “perceptions that, if they continued engaging in collaborative cycles of inquiry…positive outcomes would be achieved” (p. 15).

**Distributed Leadership creating the Glue**

Top on the list of building conditions for inspiring the persistence to engage in cycles of collaboration and innovation was distributed leadership and a strong focus on teacher ownership (Hord, 1997). Distributed leadership enhanced teachers’ engagement according to Butler et al. (2015), and teams fostered “opportunities for ownership” if that wasn’t provided by school or district leaders. Timperley’s (2006) definition of distributed leadership as moving the leadership out of the top office to multiple people working in various settings fit with the team’s desire to have different participants take the lead on initiatives that inspired them, becoming the leader on that topic for the collaborative team. Likewise, specific characteristics of distributed leadership detailed in Harris (2008) are summed up in Harris and DeFlaminis’s (2016) work. At its essence, distributed leadership means “those best equipped or skilled or positioned to lead do so, in order to fulfil a particular goal or organizational requirement” (p. 144). The relational quality (Harris, 2008) of distributed learning allows for “co-constructed knowledge” (p. 119). Furthermore, collegial relations are at the centre of the commitment to work together and at the same time “thickening leadership” (p. 133). Harris (2008) cycles back to collaboration noting that school improvement evolves out of this shared work on shared goals. She describes capacity growing across the school when distributed forms of leadership support collaboration that focuses on learning and teaching using evidence. Moreover, at the centre of her distributed leadership model sits student achievement and engagement (p. 134). My questioning needed to include ways to
understand if distributed leadership was offering participants opportunities to construct
knowledge together and if it helped them grow professionally.

Owen’s (2015) research into three innovative school settings in Australia “highlights the
importance of building a strong sense of ownership and collegial professional learning…nurtured
through ongoing contacts among teachers in their day-to-day work with each other and as
‘teacher engagers’ and co-learners with their students” (p. 12). However, ownership doesn’t
come about without formal leaders creating a setting that makes teacher ownership possible. This
situation of teachers at the helm of a collaborative team also appears in Poulos et al. (2014).
Their research showed that when formal leaders implement structures, routines and protocols to
facilitate teacher interactions, teachers engaged, then led collaboration that enhanced teacher
practice, broke down isolation and increased a culture of collective responsibility for student
learning, mirroring the joint effort of formal leadership to create and sustain the teacher-led team
I was researching. Finding time for teachers to meet is also key (Hord, 1997; Steyn, 2017; Poulos
et al., 2014). Allowing leaders to cultivate leadership structures that encourage teacher
collaboration yet resist the desire to directly run such teams (Poulos et al., 2014) catalyses or
causes teacher collaboration to emerge. Formal leaders also needed to find a way to put common
planning time into the teachers’ schedules so they could define the issues needing collaboration
and have the opportunity and time to work toward solutions. I was interested to see if common
planning time would emerge as important to the Grade 8 teacher participants in the current study.
In their findings, Butler et al. (2015) noted that leaders saw how quickly teachers’ engagement in
collaboration and change was threatened if the initiative was considered to be imposed by higher
authorities. The importance of the formal leader as catalysts to teacher collaboration is described
by Hattie (2015). He sees leaders needing to build the framework for collaboration because “teachers…are so busy in their orbits of classrooms that they need leaders and systems to be critical partners in building coalitions” (p. 27). For Hattie, these coalitions, these collaborations, are the “major forum of systems” because they build on existing accomplishments and offer opportunities for others to join in to “scale up the success already about us….it is the collaborative sharing of this knowing and doing and caring. This requires the greatest investment, and the benefits for the students will be manifest, powerful and exciting” (pp. 27-28). How the participants of my research looked at formal leaders’ role in collaboration would be key.

**Putting the Literature in Context with my Study**

Besides making it clear that the nuance of effective collaboration needs further illumination, a few key themes emerged from the literature. Teachers benefit from collaboration when they feel it is an initiative they themselves began for the purpose of meeting the learning needs of their students. Variations on this theme were articulated by all the researchers. Likewise, the importance of formal leaders giving teachers a framework to step away from the maelstrom of the classroom to consider improvements, to learn, and to create common artefacts, all for the purpose of addressing the learning needs of the collective students made collaboration possible, and invigorated job satisfaction (Butler et al., 2015; Dever & Lash, 2013; Frost & Durrant, 2002; Harris, 2008; Hattie, 2015; Meirink et al., 2010; and Poulos et al., 2014). Many defined this as distributed leadership, having faith that teachers would build on the needs of their students to meet the imperative mandate of collaboration, improve student learning and along the way bolster their own professional growth (Butler et al., 2015; DuFour, 2004; and Timperley,
Defining a name for professional collaboration rests in the intent of the team. In the work of Bloom and Vitcov (2010), DuFour (2004), Wenger and Snyder (2010), and Wheatley and Frieze (2006), there are common themes including the need to have common focus and commitment and accountability to the collective work of the team; a common commitment to improving the needs for others, in this case students’ learning; and student learning focus defined by the team participants versus imposed by a formal leader or organization. While Hyslop-Margison and Sears (2010) suggest working together improves professional practice, the boundaries of autonomy are easily impacted by collaboration and so this potential view needed to be reviewed. These themes in the literature reflected what I was seeing in my own collaborative experience, fit with my hunches and helped define the questions I devised for both the individual survey and focus group research. Moreover, they mirrored the reflections I found myself writing in the early days of our collaboration. Finally the case study nature of most collaboration literature reinforced my research design as did Steyn’s (2017) open-ended question approach to ensure the participants’ understanding of their context shone through. With these themes and research approaches gathered I moved into defining my design.
Chapter 3 – Procedures and Methods

Research Methodology

For this research, I used a case study methodology. Key to this decision was the literature’s description of case study as a concrete entity or phenomenon within contemporary life, difficult to separate from its complex context and bounded by time and place (Cohen et al., 1993; Creswell, 2013; Yin, 1994). The Grade 8 team is a real-life event whose context is truly complex with its interplay of staff within the school, and the school within the district’s expectations and the educators at all those levels endeavouring to deliver education to unique students within the context of ministry requirements and community expectations. These many levels of complexity are trumped by the primary goal of expanding the learning of students, meeting their collective and individual needs to both grow and learn. The complexity of collaboration in the education world seems to inspire many researchers looking at collaborative teams to lean on the case study method as the majority of the literature on collaboration included case studies or meta-analysis of case studies. As Butler et al. (2015) note, a case in education must consider context carefully and its ability to “fuel and/or undermine educators’ investment in inquiry processes and practice change” (p. 4) as its participants navigate these intertwined requirements. Cohen et al. (1993) describes case studies like the current study as “a unique example of real people in real situations” (p. 289). The aim, as he further describes, is to give readers a clearer picture. Thus, this case study offers the chance for a clearer definition of where the team’s collaborative work sits in the literature, why the collaboration works and what the team’s members believe would sustain their work. While the ability to make generalizations are limited (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 1994), the focused look at the team’s efforts might allow the participants, the school and the district to “scale up the success” (Hattie, 2015, p. 27). A story
about what participants believe is working and why within the Grade 8 team fits with case study theory because case studies acknowledge that many variables operate within the phenomenon of study (Cohen et al., 1993); “case studies can establish cause and effect (‘how’ and ‘why’) indeed one of their strengths is that they observe effects in real contexts, recognizing that context is a powerful determinant of both causes and effects” (p. 289).

Both Cohen et al. (1993) and Yin (1994) speak to the need for multiple data sources like surveys, journals, artefacts and focus group interviews. A researcher must show in-depth understanding of the case through his or her context description and qualitative data collected in different forms (Creswell, 2013). The participants are treated as individuals and a group whose perceptions the researcher is attempting to understand (Cohen et al., 1993). Key to this understanding is the need to not have or exercise control over the events of the case (Yin, 1994). This challenges my role as a member of the team to separate myself into the researcher role when collecting and analysing the data for themes. This would conform with Cohen et al.’s (1993) statement that the case study events, perceptions and situations speak for themselves.

To ensure my research focused on what participants defined as the context of the team’s work as well as the chance to treat them as individuals (Cohen et al., 1993), I conducted an individual short-answer survey of each participant, a focus-group discussion and collected field notes in the form of personal observations of the team’s first three months of meetings. The survey entailed four open-ended questions designed to be answered individually and independently and sent back to me. Similarly, the focus group questions were kept open-ended and built off the themes found in the literature around professional development, student achievement impacts, effects on pedagogy, collaborative relationships, impact on job satisfaction
and the distributed leadership model, the roles of formal leaders, challenges inherent in collaboration and those elements best shared with others.

Besides these two survey instruments, I received ethics approval to keep field notes as a researcher and yet participant in the team being researched. These were designed to be personal observations of the early months of the team and general enough to ensure no individual participant could be identified.

**Population**

The participants of this study were myself and the ten members of the Grade 8 teaching team in 2017-2018. The team included four men and seven women. The years of experience on the team ranged from relatively new teachers to those with more than 20 years of experience. From an age perspective, the teachers spanned a 33-year range. In addition, this year’s team was made up of members new to the school community, members who have spent one or two years in the collaborative model and some who worked with the formal leadership to spearhead the grade 8 program. All ten members (myself being the eleventh member) agreed to participate. All but one submitted responses to the survey and seven of the ten participants were able to make the focus group. One of the three unable to attend the focus group submitted answers to the questions posed at the focus group meeting as I provided them to all participants in advance.

From a participation point of view, the team used distributed leadership and a consensus approach to the decisions which result from the team’s vision:
Our goal is to build a community of learners that includes staff, students, parents and organizations from the community. We are dedicated to helping students build life-long learning skills. To make this possible, we:

- solve complex problems together
- reflect on our care and concerns for others
- explore cross-curriculum content through relevant, real-life inquiry
- use a variety of learning strategies
- focus on critical and creative thinking, communication, and personal and social responsibilities
- have fun!

Our team of teachers in the grade 8 program believes in whole-child education including character education, a growth mindset, meta-cognition of learning, self-advocacy, as well as developing core and curricular competencies as set out by the Ministry of Education (Grade 8 Learning team n.d.).

**Context**

As stated, the team operates in a traditional Grade 8 through 12 high school that serves a diverse student population. Most students in the building attend four classes a day, each one an 80-minute block with a different teacher, and they move to four different classes in the second semester. All week the classes rotate so they never have the same class at the same time of the day, until Fridays where students experience a different weekday rotation each week of the month. The school serves students who attended five elementary schools defined as the school’s catchment area. In addition, the school houses a Performing Arts Academy and a Baseball
A STORY OF COLLABORATION

Academy, bringing in students from across the school district. The school operates on the unceded territory of the Snaw-naw-as First Nation, serving students from this nation as well as other indigenous students both First Nations and Metis living within its catchment. Students from different countries round out the diversity of the school, with over 60 students from multiple countries spread between classes from Grade 8 through 12. High school teachers typically teach up to seven blocks in a year with classes that span one semester (two terms). Given a full-time teaching assignment, high school teachers work three blocks a day one semester and four blocks a day another semester.

The Grade 8 team works in a different context. The eleven teachers on the team this school year have about 75 students in three classes of either Humanities (English 8 and Socials 8), STEM (Math 8 and Science 8) or French 8 and Healthy Living 8. The eleven members work as a team and two separate sub-teams. One sub-team is their discipline, with two or three other teachers responsible for the same curriculum combination – Humanities 8, STEM 8 or French and Healthy Living. This allows the teachers of the same discipline to plan together. The team members’ second sub-team is based on their pod of students. A Humanities teacher, STEM teacher and French and Healthy Living teacher have the same 75 students. The students rotate through the three classes with their three teachers and then in their fourth block move to whichever elective class the students have selected. The latter may bring students from different pods together. This means the grade 8 students move with the same group of 25 students through their three academic classes all year. In this way, the pod sub-team can discuss the needs of the same students.
A majority of the team had common prep time during most of the first semester of the year. It also participated as a team during the district’s weekly Professional Learning Community time on Monday afternoons for 45 minutes. These planning times allowed team members to become a horizontal, cross-curricular team. Both Steyn (2017) and Poulos et al. (2014) speak to the value of cross-grade, cross-discipline teams that allow for a matrix approach or discussions that are because of common curriculum, common students or support work across disciplines for all students. The team planned various initiatives including a community building exercise at the beginning of the year that created a common language for the learning community in all classrooms. They prepared two cross-curriculum inquiries for all Grade 8 students, detailed below. As individual disciplines, the team built common learning outcomes and common units during teachers’ prep time and on their own time, thus supporting each other with practical artefacts. Other practical artefacts were created when the teachers conducted reading and writing assessments that were collaboratively marked, coordinated a Grade 8 conference focused on harm prevention, co-taught a unit on growth mindset, established an ePortfolio, worked with embedded student teachers, organized full-grade field trips, designed common parent communications, conducted parent presentations, planned Grade 7 transitions with the school’s Counselling Department, and coordinated interventions in literacy and numeracy with the Response to Intervention Coordinator. The outline for the Celebrations of Learning in June was under discussion by November so classroom initiatives could be directed to this form of assessment and elective teachers could be welcomed into the process. The final piece of the matrix is the time pod teachers spend sharing the strengths and challenges of their common students. Likewise, the teachers can meet with parents and formal leadership as a team when required to support a student’s growth.
During the district’s PLC time, the team established a collaborative inquiry. The team enhanced a cross-curricular Aboriginal Understandings Unit initiated in the 2016/2017 school year. It featured one inquiry question that covered curricular work in all academic classes. The students created one mind map to answer the question across their course work. Planning for this spilled into provincial and district professional development days as well as the team’s common prep block. The team used its two-year experience with this project to host a discussion on cross-curricular initiatives and share ideas at the school district’s professional development day. The inquiry was also part of an Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network research project to which the team inputted its learning. It also inspired the team’s professional inquiry for the 2017/2018 school year, exploring how an initial directed student inquiry supports students to complete a cross-discipline inquiry on a topic that focused on their individual spark.

Focusing on enhancing the grade 8 program lies at a centre of the team’s discussions. At the same time, the team continues to work on the changes in curriculum and assessment central to the province’s education system at this time. These initiatives, which emerged in June 2017 planning meetings, along with the team’s desire to improve on the projects started the previous school year caused most to commit to spearheading different activities, taking leadership roles on a project-by-project basis. While most of the members were teachers who choose to be Grade 8 teachers, some have joined the team from other schools or are new to teaching. In this way, the team is both voluntary and an expected part of the teaching assignment. The distributed leadership model came out of planning meetings at the end of June 2017. The norms for working as a team include consensus decisions, the need for agendas, one-at-a-time sharing in meetings, and a common platform for sharing minutes and project or unit material. This team’s model only
loosely fit with the department leader structure traditionally followed in the school, both because of distributed leadership, but also because it is a horizontal, interdisciplinary team in a building traditionally made up of vertical teams. The team agreed to share the Learning Leader release time so as to increase the time available for collaboration and to increase opportunities to distribute leadership of team initiatives.

**Research Design and Procedures**

The research design started with my own field notes, personal observations that I requested permission to make through the ethics review and the participants consent letter (see Appendix A). In the field notes I made note of working relations, decision making processes, protocols, different rates of engagement, key comments made by the participants and evidence of formal leader support. None of the comments identified any particular participant, but rather looked at the team in general from one participant’s point of view – mine. In this way, my data set had some observations of the early days of the team.

With the ethics board’s and school board’s approval in place, I requested and received participant consent from the ten members of the team beyond myself, giving me a total of eleven participants. The team members were given the opportunity to decline participation in this research with a clear understanding that it would not impact the research (see Consent Letter in Appendix A). My next data was collected through an individual short answer survey (see Learning 8 Team Survey in Appendix B) in keeping with the individual and group nature of case study research according to Cohen et al. (1993). Everyone had a chance to express their initial perceptions about the collaborative team independently. I gathered their written answers to the four questions found in Appendix B from nine participants in November. I used the participants’
personal emails and asked them to return their responses in print or to my personal mail, thereby ensuring digital data stayed on a password protected computer. In addition, I continued taking periodic personal reflections on my experiences as part of my data collection through to the end of January 2018.

Next a focus group discussion was held. Prior to the focus group, I provided all participants (except one person on leave) with the questions to be used during the discussion (See Focus Group worksheet in Appendix C). As requested by the participants, I formed them into a chart that allowed them to jot down ideas before and during the discussion to help them individually guide their input to the collective discussion. With agreement from the participants, I arranged to have an external facilitator from VIU run the focus group so I could focus on the comments of the participants and ensure the discussion did not appear to be directed by me. Then I participated in the focus group with the seven participants able to attend. I listened, ran the taping of the discussion and took notes as I listened. I contributed a few comments to the discussion and a few questions. I obtained permission from the participants to tape the discussion (see Appendix A). The same document with the focus group questions included two reflection questions on the back (Appendix C). These were designed to help me understand the highlights of the discussion from the participants’ points of view. My personal reflections, the participants’ survey answers, the transcription of the focus group discussion and the notes the participants made before and during the focus group along with their reflections made up the data set for this research project. All participants’ information, except mine, was kept confidential. Information such as place of work, age, years of experience and gender were withheld in the presentation of the results to protect the participants’ anonymity and was in accordance to the research
requirements of my school district. However, due to the small size of the participant group will create a potential for being indirectly identified.

**Instrument Design**

The two main research instruments I used were individual, short answer surveys and a focus group discussion. Each served a specific purpose for this qualitative study.

With the survey, I sought personalized views from the participants as close to the beginning of the collaborative team’s year as possible. By keeping the questions open-ended and individualized, the participants could express their opinions. I purposely kept to four questions to avoid overwhelming the participants and to keep the questions from directing them too specifically and thus have me colour their picture of this case study’s context. Inspiration for this approach also came from the literature, including Steyn’s (2017) focus on open-ended questions and my research of case study literature forwarded by Cohen et al. (1993), Creswell (2013) and Yin (1994). The questions, which included What are your hopes and dreams for the team’s collaboration?; How would you define our distributed leadership model?; What role do you feel the distributive leadership model of operation will have on our work? and What words would you use to describe the team?, gave the participants the freedom to define the context of our work on their own terms. The sub questions about challenges and positives reinforced that their story need not only be built on good news topics as noted in the literature by Little (2003), my reading on professional autonomy (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010; Naylor, 2011); O’Keefe’s (2012) discussion of effective collaboration and my own observation of various levels of engagement during the early months of collaboration.
The second main research instrument was a focus group discussion, again with specific open-ended questions. While many of the case studies in the literature utilized personal interviews, I chose a focus group specifically because I was researching the collective story of a team and so wanted to hear how they would build on each other’s comments to help define and describe, qualify and question the collaboration process they were collectively working within. Focus groups not only gather the group’s answers but also help reveal the relationships within the group and their viewpoints. This is reinforced by Morgan (1996) when he notes:

This ability to observe the extent and nature of interviewees’ agreement and disagreement is a unique strength of focus groups. A further strength comes from the researcher's ability to ask the participants themselves for comparisons among their experiences and views, rather than aggregating individual data in order to speculate about whether or why the interviewees differ (p. 139).

All of the participants received the questions for the focus group in advance based on the request of a few of the participants. The notes the participants made before and during the focus group as well as their reflections on the highlights of the conversation were requested by me, and the seven people who attended all agreed to share their notes. Three other participants were unable to attend and one of those chose to email me responses to the questions used during the focus group, which I included in the raw data set. I attended the focus group and took notes, ran the recording and interjected with a couple of my own reflections on the topics discussed. The meeting was run by an outside facilitator so participants would not feel I was directing their discussion and so I could focus on listening to the picture they were painting about the team versus worrying about the flow of the conversation.
The initial list of focus group questions provided within my ethics review package totalled fifteen. They evolved from my initial reading of Little (2003), Meirink et al. (2010), Owen (2012; 2015) Poulos et al. (2014) and Steyn (2017). They all spoke to the product of collaboration, the impact on teacher learning, innovation, teacher ownership and the conditions needed to sustain and foster collaboration. After continuing my review of the literature and presenting my preliminary work, I reread Steyn (2017) and read Parsons (n.d.; 2013) as well as receiving feedback from Parsons (personal communication, March 3, 2018) on my presentation. The notion of too many questions and too structured a focus group began to emerge; this later notion was built out of reading Morgan (1996) and his overview of focus group and consulting with the outside facilitator. As stated earlier, focus groups offer, as Morgan (1996) says, the researcher a chance to hear the participants “comparisons among their experiences and views” (p. 139). Too many questions, I determined would limit the time for hearing the participants. For these reasons, I amalgamated the questions into seven main question with prompts underneath. These are found in Appendix C and continue to follow the themes from the literature with queries like: What is it like to be part of a collaborative team?, what impact do you think collaboration is having on your teaching practice?, what advice could your team give to others who aren’t in your context but want to make collaboration work?, what impact has it had on students and their learning and how do you know?, what impact is distributed leadership having on your team’s collaboration?, looking at the words used the survey to describe the team what do you notice and would you change anything?, and what do you feel is needed to sustain a collaboration like yours? The same themes from the literature guided the list, but with fewer questions and prompts to keep the conversation moving, if required, the context of the
collaboration from the participants’ view was better controlled by the participants. They could interpret the questions from their perspective.

The other adjustment I made to the original focus group document was in response to participants’ request for the questions in advance so they felt more prepared to talk thoughtfully about collaboration. They wanted to be able to write down their ideas in anticipation. Based on input I received from Parsons (March 3, 2018) after the presentation of my preliminary research, I asked the participants to reflect on the discussion immediately after the focus group ended. These reflections helped me see what they viewed as the most important information, again letting the participants’ words focus the context I was researching in this case study. This corresponds with what I noted from Cohen et al. (1993) that the participants be treated as individuals and a group whose perceptions the researcher is attempting to understand.

Finally, I periodically reflected on meetings and decision processes of the team during the school year. As a member of the collaborative team, it was hard to separate the research from the work. I was fully aware of the team’s initiatives and decisions. It was not possible to be completely objective as a researcher because as an active participant on the team, its works was for me filtered by my own perceptions and frustrations. The reflections that matter for the purposes of this research were those that focused on the collective work of the team versus my own personal successes or challenges with the collective work. My bias however colours the direction of the research. I believed and continue to believe in the value of collaborative work, hence my interest in researching it. To reiterate, I was looking at the work of the team through an appreciative lens for both the purposes of effective research and because that is the opinion I hold. My reflections were informal in nature. I focused on noting comments from others on how
the team worked together. I noticed frustrations and asked questions about what might be their
genesis. I also noted how people interacted, protocols, approaches taken with artefacts and
variations in participants’ involvement in the team. My intent was to as Cohen et al. (1993) and
Yin (1994) say, ensure my data set had a variety of perspectives on the same case, offering me
points of comparison and interpretation of themes.

Data Analysis

Throughout my data analysis, I strove to work with the responses of the participants as a
group versus as individual comments. This supported my intent to look at the team’s story of
collaboration. It helped preserve participants confidentiality. While I referenced the individual
comments made during the focus group, these comments were to illustrate a commonly agreed to
point by the group. My observations are the only pieces of data personally attributed.

My data analysis started with the survey data and my observations. I transcribed my field
notes and then rearranged the notes into themes. These included formal leader support,
improving practical artefacts when created collaboratively, mining the new curriculum and
building community together, need to work through ideas before jumping to the “to do list”,
trusting others, protocols, and getting noticed by teachers not on the team. Reading through the
data from the survey responses I also sought common themes, but the common themes did not
follow the questions directly. Different questions inspired different comments by each
participant, and in this case, the themes included: improved learning environment for students,
job enhancement, consensus-driven collaborative leadership, formal leadership support of the
structure and initiatives, and challenges sit at the edge of collaboration.
I transcribed the focus group recording word for word using Garage Band to listen to the sound file. This application allowed me to reverse and repeat participants’ statements until I could get the words accurately in print. For the raw data, I used the questions as phrased during the focus group for headers, allowing the participants to recall the discussion more easily when they reviewed the data set. I gave the participants the survey data in themes so as to disguise individual comments. Those participants who contributed to the given data sets were given a chance to review the raw data. The preliminary data sets were sent to the home email of those who participated in each research method. The members were given two weeks to make any changes to the contents of the data, removing or rephrasing any parts they felt needed editing. At the end of that review process, I had received no feedback, which my note to them said was a sign of approval about what they had read. It was then I wrote up the research report.

With approval for all the data sets from the survey and field notes in place, I started to move the transcribed focus group data around into statements that had common messages. Again themes emerged, and again different questions caused different participants to reveal these common ideas: building a stronger program and a stronger teaching practice, impact on students, key elements for successful collaboration, the distributed leadership model, challenges and feedback on the words used to describe the team. With the themes defined, I wrote the results.

Reliability and Validity

The internal validity of the research is improved through focus group methodology because my question speaks to why the group works as a collective. Focus groups not only gather the group’s answers but also help reveal the relationships within the group and their viewpoints. Again this is reinforced by Morgan (1996) when he speaks to the “the researcher's
ability to ask the participants themselves for comparisons among their experiences and views, rather than aggregating individual data in order to speculate about whether or why the interviewees differ” (p. 139). The fact that different questions in both the survey instrument and the focus group elicited different answers, but that those still fit under one of the common themes reinforces that the participants had freedom to interpret the questions, yet held some common views.

Likewise, by keeping the questions open ended, recording the session and having an outside facilitator, the credibility of the data increases as the control is more effectively with the group being researched versus me guiding and thus unwittingly manipulating the data. The external validity in the research is not as strong. It is not possible to extrapolate the views of ten teachers who work together as representative of all groups who will work together, however, it does give insight into why those individual professionals choose to work collaboratively in a system that does not traditionally build such working relationships.

By using an initial survey and journaling my own observations, I added to both the validity and reliability by looking at the team’s work from different angles. The survey questions were the same for all participants and the focus group offered them a common setting within which to focus on the questions. This is not repeatable as their evolution as team members and individuals may lead to different responses in time, but the team make up was consistent over the time of the research so in that way is a reliable constant. I also reviewed the data with the participants to ensure they saw it as reflective and believable of their context. Finally, using the themes from the literature to construct the questions of both survey instruments reinforces the validity of the research.
Chapter 4 – Results

Kicking the Year off with a Survey

As I contemplated the focus I wanted to take with my thesis, I realized that I really wanted to understand why collaboration was working for my now three-year old work team. I had my hunches, but as a single member it was a single perspective. Workplaces are nuanced and collaboration in any setting is challenging, let alone in the world of teaching where solitary work in a classroom is the norm. To paint the clearest picture of my research focus, I wanted to place the team in the center of a room and see it from all angles, to hear all members speak to why this collaborative group of educators continued to hold together. At the same time, I collected weekly observations during our intense collaboration period. This included school start up and the first few months of Grade 8. During this time, the team planned common initiatives in all classes as well as a few grade-wide gatherings focused on building community with the Grade 8s. Doing this required regular meetings and shared efforts to build lessons on Ideal Learners (students’ language around the provincial Core Competencies), ePortfolios, common technology etiquette, growth mindset, student understanding of the district assessment language, reading and writing baselines, embedded student teachers, a healthy living conference, a path through each sub-team’s curriculum and a guided cross-curricular inquiry on pre-contact Canada in preparation for an independent cross-curricular inquiry on students’ own spark at the end of the year.

The first data set I review here comes from the individual survey, which offered a way to hear each person’s initial view of the 2017-2018 year. Nine of the ten participants responded to the survey from early November through to early December based on their individual schedule. The short answer survey elicited some clear themes: innovative programming for our students,
enhanced work and learning environment for teachers, the value of consensus-driven collaborative leadership, the need for formal leader support, and the challenges that sit at the edge of collaboration. The following details the participants’ views.

**Ability to create an innovative program for our students.** The cross-curricular, podded and linear grade 8 program the team works within captivates the teacher participants’ imaginations. Participants saw the Grade 8 program for students as offering a rich, engaging learning environment, one that encourages and inspires students to embrace challenges. Participants suggested this opportunity for students stems from the team’s ability to bring together the ideas and plans of all members to create excellent lessons and content. The cross-curricular nature of the team’s initiatives was also suggested to create community for students. One participant expressed the hope that should the team effectively incorporate and model growth mindset values, it would “increase the chances that our learners will be given the opportunities to use and develop the skills and strategies necessary to thrive in an uncertain future.”

**Creating job satisfaction and professional learning through collaboration.** One participant linked the creation of a “high quality and innovative program with unique opportunities for students” to job satisfaction for the teachers involved which “reinforced what we are doing and results in a better grade 8 program.” For this individual, creating a positive innovative learning environment for students led teachers to a more positive work environment. The two were inextricably linked in the participant’s mind. Others used phrases like “making teaching fun” and “excited to come to work each day.”
I linked the theme of professional learning to the repeated response from participants that the “multiple brains” brought to a task made the product under discussion better, something I reflected upon during my personal observations. I noted early in the year that “it seems like we talk a different language but really it’s that we come from different angles with the same view which helps us make lessons clearer for other teachers and better for students.” Likewise, I recorded a quote from a colleague after working with her on a project: “it is so much better when we do it together, explaining your ideas, hearing another’s ideas and the project or lesson just gets better faster.”

Many participants noted that team members are “growing as teachers” because of the collaboration. One person linked the ideas of improved job satisfaction and professional learning when saying “collaboration allows us to try new things that we wouldn’t otherwise try on our own and to build an idea into a better fit for our program.” This professional growth was also described through words like “mentoring and modelling at a level that I have not worked in before.” The need and effort to be accountable to each other as teammates and in the end help each other get better at our jobs also emerged: “the value placed on the input and wisdom of our colleagues drives collaboration and will likely keep it going even when the team doesn’t have common prep time.”

Consensus-driven, collaborative leadership. One participant noted that the distributed leadership model used by the team is a product of collaboration, “a consensus decision by the team and is a result of the age of the team.” The same participant noted that early in its formation, the team benefitted from the firmer direction that comes with a leader, but that now facilitation and organization were greater needs and thus define the learning leader’s current role.
This was backed up in other responses where people noted that it helped that the learning leader refocused the team and liaised with formal leadership but that members also valued the freedom to lead initiatives. One person described it as a “shared workload because everyone takes ownership of the program.” Participants spoke again to different ideas and opinions coming out of the discussion and a consensus-model driving the decision making. The notion of an equal voice was stated as well as the team members wanting to be a team. Some new members reported feeling heard and included. As one participant said: “all members have direction and control over all aspects of the team which [is] novel and democratic.” Another said “the collective approach helps members feel they can contribute at a higher level because of collective decisions.” They cited such initiatives as the Network of Inquiry and Innovation and Aboriginal Enhancement School Network inquiries, the embedded student teacher program, a Yes2Know healthy choices conference for grade 8s, specific curriculum units and technological integration, all led by different members of the team. The team members noted that more projects and diverse projects were initiated and implemented because different members were taking the lead and assuming the workload with the confidence and support of the team behind them.

**Formal leader support vital.** While the team meets as a group of teachers to collaborate, the participants acknowledged the importance of formal leadership support. The program the Grade 8 team work within depends on the school’s formal leaders creating structures that allow their collaborative work. The Grade 8 program involves podding all the students so only two or three teachers cover all of the students’ academic subjects – Humanities, STEM and Healthy Living taught by teachers also qualified to teach French. Besides hiring teachers willing to blend
these subjects, the timetable was constructed so most of the grade 8 teachers teach in the same three blocks of the day, leaving the fourth block free as a common preparation block, allowing collaboration for a majority of the team for half the year. This year the team also appreciated the formal leaders’ willingness to support all team members sharing the team’s Learning Leader’s release time so collaboration could continue when team members were teaching four out of the four blocks of the day. Participants also noted that formal leadership supports the team’s many initiatives like grade-wide conferences, grade-wide field trips, alternate ways of showing learning, alternate start-up plans in September, new methods to communicate with parents, and training to absorb changes in reporting and assessing in the Province’s Kindergarten to grade 9 programs. Finally, team members said they felt acknowledged for their extra efforts as team members.

**Words to describe the collaborative team.** When asked during the survey to list words that describe the collaborative team, the participants came up with a large collection. To highlight the repeated words and remove any influence by me on prioritizing their placement in a document, I copied each word, including the repeated uses of the same word. I entered all this data into an application called *WordItOut* (Enideo, 2018) which increases the size of repeated words (see Figure 1). The words create a picture of collaboration that emphasized five words: fun, passionate, dedicated, collaborative and innovative. Other prominent words were synonyms: caring, generous, supportive, welcoming and compassionate fit with passionate; invested, collective ownership, flexible and motivated fit with collaborative; professional, talented, driven, hardworking, knowledgeable, student-centred, tireless and experienced all fit with dedicated; and willing to take risks, stubborn, chaotic, growth mindset, ground breaking, willing to support new
ideas, awesome, and excitable all fit with innovative. Finally, welcoming, honest, supportive, hilarious and valued fit with fun. When the participants reviewed Figure 1 during the focus group, one participant was surprised that use of technology didn’t rise higher in the image, digital being mentioned but once. However, she surmised that emphasis by participants on innovative encompassed the team’s use of technology in both its protocols as a team and to support students’ engagement in curricular competencies. Some members of the team interpreted a few of the words as negative, including controlling, chaotic, stubborn and excitable. The discussion revealed they could find a positive side to chaotic, excitable and stubborn.

Figure 1. Participants’ words to describe the team. The word picture includes the words the participants used to describe the Grade 8 team. The on-line WordItOut application randomly generated the order and by default, sizes the words based on their frequency. In this way, the figure represents the weight given each word in the participants’ collective word list.
The challenges that sit at the edge of collaboration. In the survey, I deliberately asked a question about the challenges as seen by the participants. The messages in the responses indicated that challenges existed and without attention to them, these challenges could become limiting difficulties. One challenge the team members identified as key was attending to communication; they said that sharing the processes behind team plans and end goals wasn’t always easy if everyone couldn’t make the meetings. Time management was another element that could upend collaboration; “it is easy to get side-tracked and waste time quickly.” The issue of too many meetings was also raised with some preferring the sub-group meetings around subject-matter plans, common-student issues or specific initiative teams; finding them more efficient. The size of the larger group and its desire to discuss and work through issues to consensus was overwhelming for some, causing them to check out of the discussion at times. Finding an entry point into the team and believing you are part of a collaboration process versus being told what to do can be hard to discern without some background on the team’s previous initiatives. The participants noted that having members who want or need independence in a collaborative environment is hard for both the individual member and the team. So, building an equal sense of investment, presence and contribution among the members came up as a challenge.

Working through the challenge of consensus was the final issue mentioned; “consensus is the goal but we don’t always agree and some agree to move forward to honour the team and support the direction as if we supported it.” That ability to make that commitment to the team is something one participant suggested requires team support: “consensus building is messy and we are all human beings. Passion for our work is inseparable from the emotions that arise when
disagreements are not easily resolved. There will be times when collaboration may seem like too much work; it is possible that some members at times will want to give up but supporting those members at that time is part of our model.”

**A Spring Check-in, this time with a Focus Group**

The survey responses illustrated some key themes and a sense of consistency amongst a majority of the participants. Yet this research was meant to be a story of collaboration. As I said earlier, I wanted to see the picture the team painted when they were hearing each other’s views. I held the focus group in spring for two reasons. By spring, the team had traditionally worked through and initiated many of the collective Grade 8 program plans. The majority of the team was working four-out-of-four blocks in spring, so collaboration time only occurred on the district-mandated PLC time on Monday afternoons, Professional Development days, jointly taken prep days using the shared Learning Leader time, or on the team members’ own time after school. I wanted to hear how participants characterized the team when the collaborative time took more effort. As with the survey, some key themes emerged. Participants focused on improving student learning, enhancing participants’ teaching practice, improved achievement by students, defining the elements of effective collaboration, evaluating the impact of a distributive leadership model, the challenges faced by teams that collaborate, and the importance of respect and commitment.

**Focusing on the improving learning for students at the team’s core.** During the discussion, the team collectively established a common view of their collaborative team’s origins. How the team started launched the focus group discussion. The team spawned three years ago when several members of the then Grade 8 teaching team asked the questions “what
kind of learners do we want our students to be, and what skills do we want them to have?”

People interested in this inquiry came together with formal leadership to build a Grade 8 program based on podding students with three teachers who cover their four academically required courses – Humanities, STEM, French and Healthy Living. The students have the same classmates for all of these classes, and when they are taking their electives, their grade 8 teachers are free to meet together, at least for half the school year. With the common prep time, the teachers focused on answering the questions they had posed as well as deeply mining the new curriculum, its core competencies, curricular competencies and standards-based assessment. This year’s team includes brand new members and some people who have been part of the team since its inception. At the same time as they built an innovative program, the participants noticed working this way made it easier to support all students and limit those students not achieving. Said one participant: “by working together we took things off our plate in order for us to go deeper and try different things. This happened by sharing unit plans and resources that normally took hours to do as an individual teacher and put it to the group level, freeing up time and energy to try new things.”

**Building a stronger teaching practice and sense of self-efficacy.** The idea that collaboration lightens a teacher’s workload continued as participants discussed the team’s impact on their own practice. The participants said the inquiry and joint commitment that started the team made the entire group stronger; “it lightens our workload considerably; it strengthens our ideas; it allows our teaching to improve.” As they did in the survey and I did in my reflections, the participants tied the improvements for students to “multiple brains” working on a project. Said one individual, “there is always someone with a perspective the group isn’t thinking about;
everyone’s open and listens to that idea and then it takes us in a completely different way, so we put our best foot forward.” The group said this happened both with cross-curricular team initiatives, but even more often with the smaller subject-focused teams. Some of this appears to occur because building material other teachers will use pushes people’s attention to quality and clarity: “when you make something yourself or help make something for the collaborative team it is not just for your class. It helps push what you design to be better. It has to be used by other teachers so it has to be better.” Participants noted that this push to do one’s best because others will use the material also inspires risk taking because participants are using other people’s ideas: “it pushes us out of our comfort zone, encouraging us to move beyond what we would usually do or try something we thought we would never try.” Another participant described the chance to explore teaching approaches and strengths of others by teaching jointly-created lessons and units.

The opportunity to feel supported in their practice came out in the discussion. Participants used words like safe, supported, energized, excited and proud. Some noted that building a community of teachers helps students build community. Newer members of the team spoke to mentorship. Others talked about lessons improving because you have a chance to check in with others tackling the same work, determining what is working and not working together. One member suggested she would never not want to collaborate. As others agreed with her statement, they tied some of it to the need to evolve their practice and assessment inherent in the new provincial curriculum and assessment practice: “it is changing my practice a lot, with the new assessment and the new curriculum; we get it and see the benefits for the students. Working to implement these changes as a group instead of by yourself is huge.” The opportunity for professional growth was highlighted by another participant who saw the collaboration of the
team as on a scale beyond any he had previously experienced, citing its consistency, the level of support and its cross-curricular nature. He also noted the team’s ability to create a stronger sense of self-efficacy for him by helping him foster the mindset that he could continually improve: “personally, I believe that this collaborative experience has unlocked a growth mindset, similar to the one we try to instill in our students that I’m not sure I believed I possessed.”

**Improved student learning through collaboration.** While the teacher participants saw themselves and the program they teach within growing and improving with collaboration, they also felt it supported student learning. Participants said students reported views that the program makes them feel good about their transition to the high school. Another noted that the students talk about the consistency across the classes, inspiring discussion and collaboration. One member has a personal connection to a grade 8 student outside of the school setting and hears this student saying “I am trying to extend my learning.” The team member interpreted this as the student “owning his learning, seeing its value and doing it for a reason.” The community nature of collaboration was highlighted by another participant; he said “when teachers act and collaborate together like a family then students start to act and learn together like a family and you can hear that from their conversations outside of class time. They do take care of each other.” Others noted that students appreciate the chance to get to know their teachers and peers because they can take on challenges more easily. Likewise, the teachers felt students know their teachers work closely and share and that it carries into the success of the student’s work, their behaviour, their sense of belonging, their resilience and their response to class routines. One participant summed up the support they all spoke of by saying, “for the first time in my career, I feel like I teach students, not curriculum, so because we collaborated, we are stronger teachers. I think it allows
us to support our students at a deeper level than we have ever done before. We look at many aspects of the learner. I think we offer a very rich, diverse program that offers many more things than just the curriculum and that is what I am most proud of.”

Belonging, safety and social and emotional support goes hand in hand with rigor according to the participants. Said one participant: “these kids are becoming so savvy. I am proud of them. I forget they are grade 8s. We ask so much of them and they rise all the time.” Another participant noted that supporting students’ learning is easier when you can check in with another teacher and learn students’ strengths and weakness in different class settings. Collaboration has pushed all participants into incorporating core competencies (called ideal learning strategies by the team), growth mindset, proper technology use, and attention to student identity. Participants enthusiastically pointed to Grade 8s experiencing the challenge of conducting an inquiry project; “Which is massive at the grade 8 level,” exclaimed a participant. The ability to teach across the ability levels in the classroom was also cited by a participant: “using inquiry and collaborating cross-curricularly but also with my [content] colleagues has made it much easier to adapt to multi-ability groupings in my classroom, measured by the percentage of students reaching a Developing or higher by the end of the year.” [Where Beginning is just starting to understand concepts with support, Developing is working below grade level but independently, Applying is working at grade level and Extending is working beyond grade level].

Key elements for successful collaboration. Understanding the potential to create similar collaborative teams in other schools and districts is key to the purpose of this research. This
question was posed to the focus group participants, and they spoke to those elements of the team’s work they felt vital for its success.

**Common preparation time.** The participants felt dedicated prep time built into the structure of the teachers’ working day was vital. Podding the students with the same three teachers was equally as important as it offered better transition support for students and, at the same time, made common prep time possible within a traditional high school setting with four blocks of classes a day. While common prep time was necessary, the participants also noted that personal time was still used by the team and felt it reflected the commitment required.

**Individual commitment to the collaborative structure.** For collaboration to truly succeed, team members’ individual commitment to the collaborative structure was the yin to the common prep time’s yang. These two concepts were inextricably linked by participants who noted that if you weren’t honouring that common prep time with your undivided commitment, the prep time wouldn’t work: “there needs to be a consistent time set aside to collaborate and everybody has to honour that time; it is extremely important to commit to and show up to, and members need to be respectful of everyone’s time and commitment, so when you do meet, it has to focused. We are super busy with what we do, so when we make the time to collaborate, we need to come with the understanding that we are here to work. We get as much done as we can, respecting the fact that we all have other things to do as well.” The notion of commitment to the team and to the common time members have to work together was described as paramount but also what let the team be successful. Said one participant: “people who are part of this collaborative team have the chance to be part of high-level content, both lessons and collaborative projects; to us that is a high reward, so we really want that buy in.”
Size of the collaborative team. Building the commitment is easier, said the participants, with a smaller group. Almost all of the participants agreed that a smaller number of teachers working in the Grade 8 program was vital. They described it as good for supporting students and good for the Grade 8 teachers because it built a common focus and clarity. They detailed how the team requested that formal leadership limit the number of Grade 8 teachers in the program versus having a number of teachers teaching only one or two blocks of Grade 8. They said this was accomplished by having teachers agree to teach combined courses; English and Socials were joined into Humanities; Math and Science into STEM. At the same time, formal leadership posted jobs that linked French and Healthy Living as linear courses taught by the same teacher.

Formal leadership support. The team lauded this support by formal leaders. They added that successful collaboration depends on the formal leaders establishing structures like common prep time, student podding, and a limited number of teachers. Besides the structures and inherent financial commitment required, the team pointed to the formal leaders’ faith in the team’s work, their demonstrable excitement about what the team is doing and spoken pride about what is happening with the program.

Using protocols. The value of protocols came up through a direct question from the facilitator about what was used by the team. The participants noted that using the same technology was vital. The team uses the Google Suite of applications. They said the ability to jointly edit and improve a document, watch minutes be created in real time and build common calendars with links all made collaboration easier at meetings and at home working on line with a teammate. Check-ins were used at longer meetings they said. From my own reflections, we
also used a speakers list to make joint planning time more effective and ensure all got a chance to talk.

**Distributed leadership supports an established team.** According to the participants, the distributed leadership model used by the team was itself a collaborative choice, a result of collaboration rather than causing of their collaborative model. They noted that the team still has a Learning Leader (district-wide title for teacher leaders) who develops agendas, reminds people of meetings, runs the meetings, has difficult conversations with members if needed and liaises with or lobbies formal leadership and the district. That individual however isn’t seen as the person who drives the content of the team’s agenda or program direction. One participant summed up the picture of joint ownership by saying, “we all contribute and own and are a part of what we are doing. We can all feel proud of it. None of us are following, and if we follow, it is by choice not by demand. Someone else takes the reins and we support them to do something they like and then it’s our turn to take up the lead at a different point.”

Participants said they like the chance to follow their passion and have the support of the team. This support gave a feeling of safety to participants. They said it “allows us to get way more done, instead of one person being a crazy person trying to keep all the balls in the air.” Participants felt this shared leadership on team initiatives worked well for the team because “there is a strong level of trust and respect.” They described the personality of the team as one of taking risks. They felt some people came to the team with this willingness and others have cultivated their risk-taking ability through membership on the team. Likewise, the participants called the team a group of people willing to be team players. One participant noted that a distributed leadership model offers potential for disaster if the collective team doesn’t possess a
team-player personality and joint commitment to the team. The participant also said that problems would mount if members weren’t prepared to volunteer and especially if members are not prepared to let go of an individual vision of a lesson or unit or project. The participants said the established relationship of the team members contributed to its ability to share the leadership vision versus depend on the vision of one leader. As one participant added, “it is working well this year, but it isn’t something a brand-new team could instantly do and find successful.”

**Being upfront about the challenges.** As committed and positive as the discussion was, the participants did not shy away from the challenges of collaboration. It became clear in the discussion that all participants saw each other as strong personalities, some describing themselves as Type A personalities. Commitment to the Grade 8 program underscored their collective comments like an anchor stabilizing the participants in the sea of progress they engage in to create the best learning environment possible for their students. Yet they kept saying the program engenders different visions, different hinge points for all participants, so collaboration in their view is not void of challenges. Likewise, the structure of the program and the changes in the provincial education environment that inspired the team are occurring within traditional bell and timetable structures, a unionized environment, a district balancing a standard-based focus to assessment in the province’s new Kindergarten to Grade 9 education program as well as the letter grade and percentage assessment process in B.C.’s Grade 10 – 12 program, and finally a parent community hard pressed to absorb all the recent changes in education. In keeping with my appreciative inquiry, I have collected the themes of challenge statements with positive directions.

**Commitment and getting full buy in through respect and candor.** The participants made it clear that it isn’t possible to have the energy to be an enthusiastic collaborator 100 percent of
the time, so they are grateful that the network in the group buoys them up until they can more effectively reengage. They attributed this support to the relationships the team has built.

Likewise, those relationships make it easier to have challenging conversations to bring people back in or to resolve tension. Said one person, “it is an understanding group and we are willing to call a spade a spade and to know when we are out of line, so we can be called back in.” The candor comes from the team’s years of experience said another participant; “as we went through this collaborative model for a few years, it became apparent that it was really important to say what we feel. It is really important to address the issues head on because otherwise it makes it worse.”

The candor helps manage the messiness of collaboration they said, giving them hope of reaching consensus because they see disagreement as an asset rather than a liability. When the facilitator asked, they agreed that when “having a healthy debate about a topic or unit, we have enough respect for each other that we can put the topic in the middle of the table and leave the personality out of it.” Participants noted that there have been times when one person wants to move an idea forward and someone else doesn’t. The participants agreed that it was by taking the time to talk it out and hear the similarities in the ideas; “we stay at it and we keep hashing it out.” In the end, the team said consensus looks like getting to a place where people see in the team’s plan those things they can’t move forward without and those things they can agree to live with even if it isn’t their first choice.

Commitment, respect and focus staves off challenges. Participants suggested commitment looked like focus and listening because sidebar conversations were a key challenge in their mind. One person said “side conversations make us lose the single focus in the group.”
Many agreed with the comment and added that it makes it hard to move forward. Another person added that the side conversations often occur because an issue is bugging someone, an indication that it may need more time. In my own reflections I noticed that the team could jump too quickly to a “to do list” and the side conversations forced us back into the reasons behind the initiative, helping new members see the purpose and better define why we were making improvements.

Despite many comments in the focus group about consensus-decision making, one participant did point out that she sometimes “forces” herself to let go; “I had it in my mind to do one thing and the group wants another, but I have to let go and trust that it works out and not take it personally.”

**Balance the number of meetings.** The risk of meeting too often was supported by all the focus group participants. They recounted that there were a lot of initiatives the whole team worked on together at the beginning of the year to get the Grade 8 program started, stating that they deliberately front-end the whole-team collaboration. Then it is important to respect the other commitments members have in the school and cut back on the number of whole-team meetings. The participants said they called each other on the number of meetings this year, drawing on past experiences when too many meetings created resentment amongst members. They suggested “too many meetings” was defined by the climate of the group, when they started feeling like the meetings were a waste of time. This conflict apparently helped the team strengthen its collaborative skills because it learned it had to be up front about issues that were causing feelings of resentment.

**The challenge of populating the team.** The participants mused on the confines of a unionized system. While job descriptions describe the team process and interviews (if required)
include questions asking if a person is up for the element of collaboration, it is hard for a prospective new team member coming from outside the school to know who they might be collaborating with or appreciate the breadth of the program right away. The team felt structures were needed to let teachers select into a collaborative team versus needing to pick such an option because they needed a fulltime job, something the participants felt was more important than the team itself. They felt leadership could sell the program and encourage those who will want to be a part of it to bid into open Grade 8 positions. Likewise, if a teacher needed a break from collaboration or was not comfortable with such a working arrangement, that person needed a way to work with formal leadership to move into a different position that supported him or her. The participants agreed that such structures were important for individual teachers and the team; “if you have a person who is not invested in the team, that sucks the life out of the team; it is not good for the person and not good for the team.” They added that the “team is only as strong as the members.”

Finding a way into collaboration for new members. At the same time, some participants noted that coming into the team was hard because the team had so many initiatives and units already in place: “coming in you have to find your niche where you can be helpful and being present helps you see where you can improve and contribute.” Likewise, some found the common timing for units restrictive at the same time as having the chance to build these resources together was comforting. Some expressed that while everyone has a voice, there are people who do more than others. This prompted discussions about the team absorbing the different stages people are at in their career with one person suggesting it was only in the last few years of her career that she felt she could come out of her cave and contribute.
Respect and commitment ringing through the focus group process. As the focus group progressed, some key behaviours of the team shone through. People gave each other room to give feedback on the topics. While some participants spoke more often, all participants were heard. Laughter and teasing was balanced with earnest focus. This was apparent even in the digital recording line, moving between a relatively straight line with few ripples and then breaking into wide sound wave swings as agreement was expressed or laughter ensued. People built on each other’s ideas, making the same point in different ways. One teacher was called away and returned despite the commitments of a recent parent call.

Right after the focus group ended, the participants, at my request, reflected on what elements of the conversation they felt were most important. Commitment, total buy-in, and being fully in were seen as the main points expressed in the focus group according to these reflections. They saw this as something both team members and formal leadership needed to demonstrate. Collaboration benefiting both teachers and students was another key highlight, as was shared leadership. The personal growth team members have enjoyed through the collective effort to take risks with new initiatives was cited, with one member saying it “leads to a very high level of work that pushes our boundaries and hopefully for students as well.” Finally, the reflections from participants noted the candor and honesty from the participants during the focus group to discuss what works and what does not.

In this way, looking at both the survey and focus group data as well as my own reflections the following five main points emerged and created a jumping off point for writing my conclusion:
1. **Student learning sits at the centre of collaboration**: An innovative program focused on improving learning for all students needs to be at the core of teacher collaboration; a clear and valued student-focused mission members can collectively describe, commit to and build upon. Students notice when teachers collaborate, gaining initiatives that support diverse learners and academic rigor as well as supporting their social and emotional selves.

2. **Collaboration depends on a commitment by teachers to the work and the team**. Teachers need to commit to the work and the team, without this the collaboration and the team cannot thrive. A distributed leadership team is in itself an outcome of collaboration and can be vital to enhancing commitment by members as a team matures, letting members pursue smaller leadership initiatives and relieving one person from being responsible for all possible innovations. It also enhances individual member’s sense of efficacy and commitment.

3. **The joy and fun of innovation is made better by working together**. Risk taking, diverse and innovative programming and new curriculum implementation are more efficient and effective as a team. Job satisfaction, self-efficacy and professional growth flourishes when teachers believe they are part of an effective collaborative team.

4. **Teachers need to be comfortable with the messiness of collaboration**. Challenges sit at the edge of collaboration; these challenges must be respectfully and honestly acknowledged and worked on by the team with support from formal leadership.

5. **Collaboration needs a supportive community to make it work**. Formal leaders play a key role creating the structures for collaboration, and they best support the team when they
build the structures in concert with the team. Trust and support from formal leaders fuels teacher collaboration and risk taking.
Chapter 5 – Conclusions, Implications and Reflections

Conclusions

I started this research wondering what it was about the collaborative teaching team I work with that made my job so fun and self-efficacious; what was our story of collaboration within a distributive leadership team? I wanted to hear from my team to balance my own perceptions against theirs, and to seat our team’s work within current literature on collaboration. For me, the story has emerged as a recipe for collaboration, one that has some distinct ingredients necessary for moving forward, some specific baking requirements but also some individual approaches to the mix. I sense that building a collaborative team from a prescribed recipe is similar to tackling my Granny’s famous cookie recipe, the flavour is always subtly different with each try in each new community where I live – and so it is with collaboration. Using the metaphor of a recipe, I found a way to tell our story.

The key ingredients. With every recipe comes key ingredients, the elements that make the project work. This is no different for teacher collaboration.

Student learning at the centre. At the top of the list and the critical item to coalesce the collaboration is a common focus on student learning. Throughout my own observations of the team, the survey response and focus group discussions, the desire to build a powerful Grade 8 program proved critical. The notion of building an innovative program for the Grade 8 students the team serves flowed out the participants’ description of their hopes and dreams for the team. This foundational piece launched the focus group discussion as well. The origin of the team, according to participants, was the question “what kind of learners do we want our students to be, and what skills do we want them to have?”
As I participated in team meetings, recorded and evaluated survey and focus group responses, I could hear the desire to build a powerful grade 8 program as the spoken and unspoken why behind answers. The frame of our program continued to be described – podding students, students having three teachers, being able to know who was teaching the same students as you and learning how students react in different settings. Participants said this collective work for common students built in more support because the students know their teachers and their peers, and a consistent environment let teachers push students to take risks. Likewise, the participants noted that the introduction of new provincial curriculum, Core Competencies and new assessment practice only reinforced the team’s new look at Grade 8 learning environments. The kind of pedagogy encouraged in the new curriculum, the focus on inquiry and cross-curricular initiatives were already on the team’s plate before the government mandated them. Likewise, rethinking assessment as seated in formative learning and moving away from percentages and grades had begun. These challenging approaches were only possible to define and refine because the team had made a commitment similar to that stated in the many types of professional collaboration. The team was using professional inquiry questions to shape the grade 8 program similar to the communities of inquiry described by Butler et al. (2015). Similarly, this could be defined by Wheatley and Frieze’s (2006) suggestion within Emergence Theory that Communities of Practice commit to work together to serve the needs of others, in this case students transferring from elementary to high school. Even DuFour’s (2004) PLC definition where teachers ensure students learn and educators work together for this collective purpose fits. The measurement of results was not as formal as DuFour’s work suggests, yet student achievement has grown in the new curriculum to encompass personal ownership and
responsibility of learning, effective engagement and skill development over content, the three main places the team began its work.

This focus on improving student learning was described as bringing together the ideas and strengths of all the participants to build events, units and lessons. The participants repeatedly noted that working together made it easier to support all students. It offered team members time to develop education artefacts they felt went deeper and supported the engagement of more students because “it took things off our plate,” and “freed up time and energy to try new things.” Participants also described collaboration as bringing “multiple brains” to a project, with the varied perspectives making the end product more effective for student learning, fitting with Owen’s (2015) research that said teacher collaboration led to “more active and creative materials in the classroom.” The assessment of success came in the form of forgetting their clientele are in grade 8 because “they rise all the time.” Said another, multiple ability groups are better served in the classroom, with more students moving into or close to grade level work by the end of the year.

That improving the learning environment for students drives teachers’ willingness to engage in collaboration fits with the literature as well. According to Dever and Lash (2013) “when collaboration was positive, it yielded strong outcomes such as resource sharing, assessment creation and unit planning” (p. 16). It mirrored the participants’ views of their world, where they are busy with simultaneous pressures on their time. They liked collaboration because they can create better learning environments and materials that work for all students. This perception tied with Hattie’s (2015) meta research proving that teacher collaboration has an effect size of 0.93 when the average effect size of a year’s progress is 0.40. It also tied closely to
what the participants saw as their self-efficacy, their ability to better address student learning by working together. In their work, Butler et al. (2015) noted that teachers’ commitment to collaborative inquiry “seemed strongest when they focused, not directly on themselves as learners, but on achieving improved outcomes for students” (p. 5). This fit with the why behind this key ingredient for the participants in my research as well.

_A commitment to the work and the team._ Over and over participants spoke to commitment, needing it to be part of each team member’s view of collaboration. The commitment they spoke of looked like attending meetings and engaging in the development and improvement of team inquiries. Commitment also looked like using common collaboration time wisely, avoiding side conversations. It meant finding ever more effective ways of keeping everyone in the loop in a profession that includes many hours of the day alone in a classroom. The team used the Google Suites to share all their work, create common calendars, and initiate input around new directions. Things as simple as using reply all when emailing information or responses to ideas helped continue the collaborative conversations outside of the face-to-face meetings. Members said commitment allowed them to share the load that is teaching and implementing new curriculum. The words participants used that described commitment included “shared workload because everyone takes ownership of the program.”

The commitment to collaborate also supported students. Besides saying team members were modelling a growth mindset, the participants agreed that students know their teachers are collaborating. This knowledge carried into the success of the student’s work, their behaviour, their sense of belonging, their resilience and their response to class routines. Said another participant “when teachers act and collaborate together like a family then students start to act and
learn together like a family and you can hear that from conversations outside of class time. They do take care of each other.” Participants said students take on challenges more easily too. This view of the impact of teacher commitment to collaboration fits with Hyslop-Margison and Sears’s (2010) work where they found collaborative networks not only built teachers’ professional identity but that “professional autonomy for teachers is not merely a fundamental requirement of quality education, but for creating students who become engaged and politically active democratic students.” Teachers who collaborate are modelling the new Core Competencies now expected of students – Communication, Critical and Creative Thinking, and Personal and Social Responsibilities – which in turn reinforces the Core Competencies’ importance to students’ long-term success.

Keeping the team smaller in size engendered commitment according to the team. The members all have a focus on grade 8 because they teach at least two blocks of a grade 8 class. The smaller group helped everyone keep their eye on the common focus – improving student learning at grade 8. It also created the relationships needed to commit even in the face of decisions a team member may not feel confident about. Said one participant, “I have to let go and trust that it works out and not take it personally.” Having the faith to take that risk to take a project down a path that doesn’t fit your autonomous view of how to deliver learning comes from a commitment that working together as a professionally autonomous team outweighs those few times when consensus can’t be built for all participants. Bloom and Vitcov (2010) described this as a culture of improving student achievement and collective efficacy built on trust in one another, and an initiative participated in because of what professionals do versus what management demands. Commitment is also pivotal to Emergence Theory (Wheatley & Frieze,
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2006), a theory that hinges on the commitment of the group to work together. It also rings through Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner’s (2015) Community of Practice work where a common passion is essential to creating the regular interactions.

Also tied to alternate definitions of professional autonomy was the idea that a successful team be made up of people willing to be team players; “there is a strong level of trust and respect.” This team player commitment by each member was seen as vital because it allowed members to let go of their individual view of what needed to done and build a collective approach that was stronger. It also allowed the team to share the development of units and initiatives versus requiring all the energy for forward momentum to come from one individual. This promoted opportunities to learn from each other and have their perceptions of how to approach a lesson, a unit or assessment practice expanded by the views of others. Said one participant, “there is always someone with a perspective the group isn’t thinking about; everyone’s open and listens to that idea and then it takes us in a completely different way, so we put our best foot forward.” In this way, the team’s approach seems less a removal of individual autonomy but a collaborative way of building on Naylor’s (2011) suggestion that autonomy can be blended with community and relationship within a supportive community. That healthy supportive relationship piece rang through more than just the words used. The behaviours at the focus group table mirrored what I see at team meetings. People laughed and teased, yet at other times they each demonstrated earnest focus. People built on each other’s ideas, making similar points in different ways or extending a point and moving it into a new direction. Three participants juggled professional and personal commitments to stay involved in the discussion. Two organized parent meetings after the discussion or returned from a parent phone call to
contribute. A third who could not attend typed up input. Participants reinforced my perceptions about commitment in their feedback saying commitment and buy-in was a key point in the focus group discussion. That they kept coming back to this concept reinforces it as a critical ingredient.

**The joy and fun of innovation made better by working together.** Having fun while innovating the Grade 8 program together not only ties to the team’s mission but was reflected repeatedly in the data. The word fun and innovation shone through the words in Figure 1 used to describe the team. The notion of being supported to become better at what they do was tied to change and innovation. According to Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, and Hoy (1998) self-efficacious teachers demonstrate a higher motivation, greater effort, and persistence in the face of classroom challenges. In this research, the participants felt it by working together to address those challenges. Said one, “it pushes us out of our comfort zone, encouraging us to move beyond what we would usually do or try something we thought we would never try.” This comes from collaboration because common units built collaboratively to use across the curriculum or within a common subject draw on the teaching approaches and strengths of others. At other times, participants are exploring a new strategy they deem will better engage or scaffold learning for students. In this way, other members of the team get to explore different approaches to teaching a subject and discuss in real time what worked and what needs tweaking to support students. Steyn (2017) found teachers who collaborate not only experienced a revival of job satisfaction but also found it “lessons … work pressure and provides more time for other responsibilities” (p. 9). The participants in this research also stated this.

Learning combined with innovation and fun. Said one of my colleagues “it is so much better when we do it together, explaining your ideas, hearing another’s ideas and the project or
lesson just gets better fast.” While not directly using the word learning, this representative quote implied learning happening in an applied way. Owen (2015) described collaboration as allowing both informal learning, like the quote suggested, and formal learning. The smile on the person’s face when she told me this, similar smiles during the focus group, along with the repeated use of fun to describe the Grade 8 team fit with Owen’s (2015) discovery, that “responsibility to the team re-invigoris[ed] passion for teaching and develop[ed] deep understanding” (p. 8). Such a deep understanding was described as unlocking a growth mindset one participant didn’t know he possessed.

Other phrases that support the size of the word fun in Figure 1 are “making teaching fun,” and “excited to come to work each day.” That lack of cynicism so often associated with teachers carrying a heavy load of change is also reflected in other language used. Students’ “different strengths” were referenced. Students were described as “so savvy,” “owning his learning,” and people who engender pride in the team members. Participants directly tied the collaborative work to better supporting the academic rigor and social and emotional health of students. They also felt they were mentoring key competencies through collaboration. Thus, fun and innovation strengthened commitment, self-efficacy and job satisfaction. As Owen’s (2015) research notes “co-planning and co-teaching led to more active and creative materials being used in the classroom.” That feels good and it revives a positive look at the challenging job of teaching because successfully innovating, hearing students say they can better explain what they know, having more students grow and stay in the class to do it, these events get teachers jazzed and make commitment to collaboration easier and more fun.
A comfort with the messy part of collaboration. This ingredient shone through the focus group discussion and the surveys. It was perhaps my biggest aha moment too. So often I have shied away from working with others because of challenges, the tough conversations. But flipping the discussion of challenges into an appreciative one helped me see that acknowledging and embracing challenges are vital to making collaboration work.

Probably the messiest part of this ingredient is getting to consensus. Participants described it as needing to stick to an issue until everyone had a chance to be heard. That takes time and requires people to consider different perspectives with an open mind. My colleagues opened my eyes to why this works for us. They see disagreement to be an asset rather than a liability. All the participants at the focus group discussion agreed that when “having a healthy debate about a topic or unit, [they] have enough respect for each other that [they] put the topic in the middle of the table and leave the personality out of it.” They agreed that ideas come forward and create disagreement yet they seek the similarity in the points presented; they “stay at it and [they] keep hashing it out.” The team’s description of consensus involved getting to a place where people see in the team’s plan those things they can’t move forward without and those things they can agree to live with even if it isn’t their first choice. After years of isolation, that feels uncomfortable to some. Likewise, being a newer teacher made some feel they had less to contribute. Finding a way to honour all the places people land when working collaboratively is vital. Yet the individual commitment buoys up the group commitment, with all participants suggesting a team member who had lost the commitment to collaborate needing a way to move into a different role with no hard feelings from the team. “The team is only as strong as it members,” according to the participants.
Another area that requires a team’s attention is helping a new member join. Seeing the direction of the team’s work and the commitment members have to annual initiatives is challenging for a person who might join a team. So, the team felt structures were required to help bring a willing, but new member up to speed.

Hattie (2015) describes some of this messiness when he refers to education’s lack of interest “in scaling up successful ideas, preferring to argue that ‘my class is unique’” (p. 20). He asks us to imagine what might happen if doctors had decided that each case of a major illness was unique. Likewise, I hear the participants in my research saying that there are common ideas in the different perspectives teachers bring to handling curricular competencies and Core Competencies. Listening for those similarities in a collaborative team, that has built commitment and positive relationships leads to innovation. Moreover accepting the challenge of different opinions are valuable according to Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor (2015) who say “differences are discussable and they contribute to learning” (p. 7), while also ensuring a collaborative team avoids group think.

The messiness of collaboration also fits with the growth mindset one participant said he hoped we were modelling, the taking risks the participants mentioned, the trying something completely new based on the faith the members have in each other’s professionalism. This acceptance of challenge and mess is reinforced by Hattie’s (2015) definition of collaboration. He says it “is based on cooperativeness, learning from errors seeking feedback about progress and enjoying venturing into the ‘pit of not knowing’ together with expert help that provides safety nets and, ultimately, ways out of the pit. Creative collaboration involves bringing together two or more seemingly unrelated ideas, and this highlights again the importance of having safe and
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trusting places to explore ideas, to make and to learn from errors and to use expertise to maximise successful learning” (p. 27). Hattie’s definition then reinforces the ingredients, a team collectively committed to student-centred collaboration, to having fun by innovating and learning and ensuring they keep the challenges of working together up front, seeing in them the seeds of success.

Baking Instructions: Make it work with a supportive community. Making the ingredients rise to a powerful collaborative team depends on the energy provided by formal leadership’s support. The participants in my research made it clear the foundation of what made their work possible was the support they receive from the school’s formal leaders. The program the Grade 8 team works within depends on the school’s formal leaders podding students so teachers have both common content teams and common student teams, adjusting the timetable to create a common block for collaboration for half the year, and limiting the number of teachers teaching in the Grade 8 program. In this way, the school created a matrixed collaboration team – members can meet as teachers who teach the same students, as teachers who teach the same subject or as a cross-curricular team teaching the same grade. The dedicated meeting time within the school day was seen as vital and was one way formal leaders showed their support. It allowed for this natural team within the building to be nurtured. The participants described this as structural and financial support, and they also pointed to the formal leaders’ faith in the team’s work. This was demonstrated at the beginning of the year with more than one of the leaders meeting with the team as it planned its start up for the building’s newest students. Their support was also demonstrated by being on teams with participants to plan events for Grade 8s, demonstrating excitement for the team’s efforts in front of the Grade 8 student and parent
community and inviting other senior leaders in the district to witness the team at work. The members used the word pride and excitement to describe the ways in which the formal leaders spoke about the team’s work.

Such building and nurturing of this collaborative team mirrored other researchers’ view of the role of formal leaders. Hattie (2015) said “herein lies a major function of systems: to provide the resources, the forums and emphasis on success in our schools. Teachers, especially many successful teachers, are so busy in their orbits of classrooms that they need leaders and systems to be critical partners in building coalitions” (p. 27). The importance of formal leaders creating and supporting collaborative teams run by teachers was also part of studies by other researchers looking at the impact of teacher collaboration and distributed leadership (Hord, 1997; Owen, 2015; Poulos et al., 2014; and Steyn, 2017). Harris (2008) like Hattie (2015) noted that school improvement evolves out of shared work on shared goals. Butler et al. (2015) said teacher teams will create “opportunities for ownership” if it wasn’t provided by school or district leadership. In this way, the formal leaders have distributed leadership to the participants who in turn have shared that leadership within their team. Harris and DeFlaminis (2016) described this as the essence of distributed leadership, where “those best equipped or skilled or positioned to lead do so, in order to fulfil a particular goal or organizational requirement” (p. 144). This environment of financial and structural support, trust and demonstrable pride, like the oven in the baking process, brings the ingredients of collaboration together to give teachers room to transform their work for their students’ benefit.

Implications
**Tackling the recipe.** When taking on a special recipe, one that evokes positive memories of the right taste, texture and look, I always wish I had been able to observe my grandmother or mother’s special touches. With baking and cooking, the flare added to the recipe helps with the building of perfect cake or casserole. Likewise, the team benefits from a blend of people who work together well. How that collection came to be together was a story of personal choice, but that it continues to work with a diverse group also involves the nuance particular to those “cooks” around the table.

So how do we share our success? The picture the participants and the literature paint is one of a natural team, working to answer innovation-oriented questions that support the development of the Grade 8 students. The team operates well because the members committed to engage in this process. The picture they describe is one of honouring the opportunity; said one participant “people who are part of this collaborative team have the chance to be part of high-level content, both lessons and collaborative projects; to us that is a high reward, so we really want that buy in.” Moreover, the time and the personal commitment of the individuals has allowed the team to build relationships that cultivate respect and candor; said another participant “as we went through this collaborative model for a few years, it became apparent that it was really important to say want we feel; it is really important to address the issues head on because otherwise it makes it worse.” Furthermore wanting to be part of the team is seen as crucial by all members, with more than one participant noting that a team member who does not value collaboration “it sucks the life out of the team; it is not good for the person and not good for the team.”
Time and space to try, fail, reflect and improve; to honour candor and avoid group-think and to engage members who want to be part of the team and honour those who find collaboration overwhelming presents some interesting challenges to the education system. Better said, these are the challenges that need attending to if the chance to “scale-up” (Hattie, 2015) the success found by this collaborative team is to be forwarded to others. The implication is that the collaborative group of teachers I studied see their work as improving the learning of their students. Their formal leaders agree through their words and actions. A review of the literature on collaboration also supports a positive view around its ability to inject innovation and improvements into student learning. So it would seem that scaling up the opportunities for natural teams makes sense.

The big questions lie in how schools and systems could take the structures formal leaders have afforded this team -- timetabling joint classes, podding students and smudging the curriculum lines – and extend them to other natural teams. The challenges – the financial, structural and community expectation challenges – alter by size of school and community. While there exists more flexibility in the new B.C. curriculum for how education is delivered, long-held views around curriculum and age-defined silos in schools are hard to change. Likewise, management and unions would need to work together to find innovative ways to honour and cultivate collaborative working relationships as well as support teachers who aren’t ready for such adventures. The participants in this survey did not use the word should or suggest, ever, that what they do works for everyone. Finally, while this team evolved from a common question, the individual members did not leave behind their unique views about how to answer that question. They used words like talk it out and diverse and candor and stubborn and excitable when
describing the team. The conversations are at times challenging. The team members value these diverse views saying it leads to better initiatives and classroom artefacts. More training in how to value the difficult conversations and the strength embedded in those conversations may support more teachers getting comfortable with the messiness of collaboration.

Those are complex inquiries for systems, formal leaders and teachers to ponder. Given the diversity and challenges inherent to educating today’s youth, and given the continued conclusion from the literature that working together makes meeting students’ diverse needs easier, such thought-provoking action research seems worth it.

**Reflections**

Throughout this research being part of the team has been both a blessing and a challenge. I found it difficult to separate what I was living each day with the more empirical task of researching it. Journaling likewise was often an afterthought as I could not easily separate myself from the decision making process. Some of this stems from my perception of research as being populated by control groups and objective viewpoints. I learned that I cannot separate being part of the work and researching the work of a collaborative team as both further my own and by association the team’s understanding of its successes, its challenges and its next steps. As teachers we call it assessment for learning when we ask students questions that cause them to consider what and how they have learned something so they can understand how to become more powerful at it, for them to see how they have grown and why. I sensed that the questions I asked my colleagues in both the survey and the focus group pushed the team to consider its successes and the places where the team still needed to grow. Thus besides supporting my research for this thesis, the research supported the team in its evolution to improve.
As I reflected back on site-based action research with its need for ethical approval, I wished for better foresight. More direct questions about how we know this is working for students may have strengthened the message. I know the participants believe working collaboratively is making a difference. They pointed to initiatives, units and learning from each other as all making their classrooms richer. They made it clear that teachers engaged in collaboration need to feel they are making strides to improve learning for students otherwise, according to my participants, the time spent collaborating would not be worth it.

While I debated collaboration and its implications, its ethical place in education within myself throughout my research, I realized an important point about the team. Ours has been work that has dug deeply into the implementation of the new B.C. Curriculum and Core Competencies. We have spent time making these changes visible in what we are teaching, how we are teaching and why we are focused on skills and building ideal learners over content. As this emerged for me, our team also started to notice that our focus needed to shift for next year. Now that we have more of a handle on the curricular competencies, the Core Competencies, on First Peoples Principles of Learning and on standards-based assessment, our next inquiry needed to focus on diverse learners in the classroom. Our inquiry-focused instruction comes from universal design for learning and a focus on supporting all learners in the classroom, yet we still had some students who needed more support or enrichment. Now we need to ask the meaningful questions around ensuring all our students get a full year of learning and what that needs to look like for students who have significant learning deficits or strengths. Yet that fits with why I believe the literature and my research proved the merits of collaboration. Looking at more effective ways to address diversity in the classroom, moving away from pulling kids out for
support or enrichment, those are daunting topics. Yet they seem more possible with more people at the table working through it together. Likewise while directly translating what the team is doing into another setting would not be possible, the ingredients for sharing and devising a blend of collaboration that has some merit shone through. Conscious effort by leadership to shape the opportunity with timetabling and class organization that builds planning time into teachers’ day, teachers adopting a common, focused question dedicated to the improvement of student learning, a group of people committed to working together and a group that understands that the messy and challenging part of working together is actually the secret sauce and the careful balancing act for success.
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Appendix A

What is our story of collaboration within a distributed leadership team: What is working and why? A look at a cross-curricular team using collaboration to enhance student learning

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I am a student in the Master of Education in Educational Leadership at Vancouver Island University (VIU). My research, entitled “What is our story of collaboration within a distributed leadership team: What is working and why? A look at a cross-curricular team using collaboration to enhance student learning”, aims to identify factors that determine the elements of collaboration that are supporting teachers’ professional growth and success as well as enhancing student achievement. My hope is that my research will contribute to the future success of the Grade 8 team, allowing it to grow and adapt to the changes inherent within education while still meeting its goal of building a community of practice dedicated to helping students construct life-long learning skills. It will also serve to inform other collaborative teacher teams on the nuances that make an emergent team of educators function effectively when they collaborate.

Those who agree to be research participants are invited to complete a short survey and participate in a focus group discussion. Team members are also going to be asked to agree to
release team minutes in March through a separate consent form. This will be done after minutes are reviewed and will be done anonymously.

If you agree to participate in the research, you would be asked questions concerning your experiences while participating in Grade 8, with an emphasis on factors such as the support of professional practice, professional growth, collaboration now and in the future, working relationships, student achievement as well as words that describe the team for you. With your permission, the focus group discussion would be audiotaped and conducted by an outside facilitator. Your participation would require approximately 180 minutes of your time.

I will also be asking for the team’s permission to use any or all the team’s minutes. Use of any minutes will only occur with unanimous consent of the team. All team members will be given the opportunity to decide if minutes will be released to the researcher, and everyone will be given the chance to do this anonymously. Finally, the researcher will be keeping a journal of her experience of the team, noticing aspects of our collective work together and its impact on her, her practice and her students. Her journal entries will include general comments about the team and only have specifics that identify the researcher.

The information collected during the survey and focus group would likely be uncontroversial, and thus the research poses only a very small risk of harm to participants. You will have your identity hidden. I will also be asking to quote you. While I will know who participates and what each person says in the participant survey and the focus group, you will remain anonymous in the presentation of the results. However, due to the small group size there is a risk that you will be indirectly identified as participating and your specific data may be
indirectly identifiable. Also note that data revealed and collected during the focus group is not confidential as it will be known to the other members of the focus group.

Given that your data will be anonymous in the presentation of the results, all records of your participation will be confidential. Only my supervisor and I will have access to information in which you are identified with the exception of the focus group where the facilitator, Dr. Paige Fisher and facilitator’s assistant, Wendy Robertson will hear your input. The survey will have your name on it but the responses kept coded in the thesis writing. With your permission, the focus group would be audio recorded and facilitated by a VIU professor and her assistant. I will transcribe the recording into writing. You will be provided a copy of the transcript and invited to make changes to the transcript as you wish (e.g. if you would like to withdraw a particular statement you made during the discussions). Electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer. Signed consent forms and paper copies of the survey and focus group transcripts will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my home. Data will be deleted and shredded at the end of the project, approximately January 1, 2019.

The results of this study will be published in my Master’s thesis, and may also be used for conference publications, presentations, and published in peer-reviewed journals.

Your participation is completely voluntary. In fact, if not all members of the team participate, the research will still be valid. There is no pressure for all members of Grade 8 to participate; the researcher’s work can go ahead with only some members participating.

If you choose to participate and change your mind, you may withdraw at any time up to the point when the researcher begins analyzing the data. This will be two weeks after participants
receive the complete data set for review. If you choose to withdraw from the study, all
information you provided through the personally identifiable reflections from team work, the
initial survey and your input during the focus group would be withdrawn from the study and
destroyed prior to the data analysis.

Regards

Tanya Lebans
VIU Student and Researcher
I have read and understand the information provided above, and hereby consent to participate. ☐ Yes ☐ No

I consent to participating by completing the survey by email using my personal email (Please provide email here). ☐ Yes ☐ No

____________________________________

I consent to participating in a focus group facilitated by two people from outside the team. ☐ Yes ☐ No

I consent to the focus group being audio recorded. ☐ Yes ☐ No

I consent to having my personal identity disclosed in the products of the research. (If one member of the team says no to this question, all participants will be coded in the final results of the research by use of a pseudonym and by eliminating reference to years of service and teaching.) ☐ Yes ☐ No

I consent to being quoted in the products of the research. ☐ Yes ☐ No

Participant Name ________________

Participant Signature ____________________________

I, Tanya Lebans, promise to adhere to the procedures described in this consent form.
If you have any concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Board by telephone at 250-740-6631 or by email at reb@viu.ca.

Please keep a copy of this consent form for your records.
Appendix B

Participant Survey Form

Learning 8 Team Survey

Principal Investigator
Tanya Lebans, Student
Master of Education
Vancouver Island University

Student Supervisor
Rachel Moll, PhD.
Department of Education
Vancouver Island University
Rachel.Moll@VIU.bc.ca

Thank you in advance for answering the following questions. The questions are part of the data I will use in my Master’s Thesis. I am asking the question “What is our story of collaboration within a distributed leadership team: What is working and why? A look at a cross-curricular team using collaboration to enhance student learning.”

Purpose of the Study:

This study is an opportunity to explore how our team works as an example of collaboration working to enhance student learning. It also offers a look at the value of a distributed leadership model to drive collaboration. Research into collaboration suggests it leads to innovation and learning that is key to improving the practice of team members, and this research could show if these dynamics are also present within the Grade 8 team. In addition, research says collaboration like that of the Grade 8 team supports student learning.
improvements. Understanding your view on our impact will help inform research on the value of teacher collaboration for student achievement.

Like other researchers, I have a hunch that collaboration within a context where the team owns the direction and the leadership focus is having a net positive impact on team members’ morale and sense of effectiveness in the classroom. Should this be true for other team members, understanding how the team views the conditions of collaboration both positive and negative could lend further weight to the literature, but also adds to the evidence of conditions for collaboration needed within the B.C. context. Understanding the crossover between the team’s vision for its leadership and its application of leadership, will help clarify the success of ownership and leadership distribution. Ultimately the question is whether this form of collaboration supports the team’s purpose -- the positive academic and social-emotional growth of students.

This survey is designed to get your initial view of the team as we embark on the new year and will be followed up with a focus group in the spring. Please answer those questions you feel comfortable addressing and email your response to me or hand deliver a printed copy to me in my school mail box using the same envelop as provided for your signature sheet below.

* Please note that you are by no means obligated to answer any or all of these questions with no explanation required.

**QUESTION #1** – What are your hopes and dreams for Grade 8 team collaboration?

**QUESTION #2** – How would you define our distributed leadership model?
QUESTION #3 – What role do you feel the distributive leadership model of operation will have on our work? What challenges do you think might arise? What do you think will work well?

QUESTION #4 – What words would you use to describe the Grade 8 team?

Please print and sign this and put it in Tanya Lebans school mailbox in the envelop she provided in your mailbox.

I understand that if I complete and submit this survey Tanya Lebans may use some or all of the information in her final written research paper. I understand that Tanya Lebans will follow the requests made on my consent form. I may edit or eliminate any part of my submission or ask to be removed from the research without explanation up to two weeks after she provides me with the transcribed data set.

Participant’s name (printed): _____________________________________

Participant’s Signature ________________________________ Date _____________
Focus Group Protocol - Introduction and Conclusion

Principal Investigator: Tanya Lebans, Teacher, SD 68 – Nanaimo Ladysmith, BC

Contact Information: tlebans@sd68.bc.ca

Action Research Supervisor: Dr. Rachel Moll
Faculty of Education
Vancouver Island University
250.753.3245 ex. 2161
rachel.moll@viu.ca

Purpose of the Study:

This study is an opportunity to explore how our team works as an example of collaboration working to enhance student learning. It also offers a look at the value of a distributed leadership model to drive collaboration. Research into collaboration suggests it leads to innovation and learning that is key to improving the practice of team members, and this research could show if these dynamics are also present within the Grade 8 team. In addition, research says collaboration like that of the Grade 8 team supports student learning improvements. Understanding your view on our impact will help inform research on the value of teacher collaboration for student achievement.
Like other researchers, I have a hunch that collaboration within a context where the team owns the direction and the leadership focus is having a net positive impact on team members’ morale and sense of effectiveness in the classroom. Should this be true for other team members, understanding how the team views the conditions of collaboration both positive and negative could lend further weight to the literature, but also adds to the evidence of conditions for collaboration needed within the B.C. context. Understanding the crossover between the team’s vision for its leadership and its application of leadership, will help clarify the success of ownership and leadership distribution. Ultimately the question is whether this form of collaboration supports the team’s purpose -- the positive academic and social-emotional growth of students.

This focus group discussion is designed to help us learn more about the team’s view on this as we explore your experiences together.

**Scripted Focus Group Introduction**

Hello, my name is __________. I am a professor at Vancouver Island University and will be facilitating this focus group for Tanya Lebans, your colleague, so she can participate in the focus group with you. Please let me introduce __________ who will operate the audio taping equipment. She will also jot down any significant shifts in the conversation or significant body language events.

This is a voluntary interview and you may withdraw from the study prior to the analysis of the data. If you are ever uncomfortable with a question, you can choose to not answer it without penalty. With your permission, the information will be audio-recorded. What is
produced here will be transcribed by Tanya and you will have a chance to edit or remove material from the data set. If you choose, you may remove yourself completely from the research up to two weeks after you receive the complete data set to review. Your real name will only be used in the presentation of the results if you have granted permission. If anyone of you has asked not to be identified all of you will be given a pseudonym you have agreed to with her and references to years of service and gender will be adjusted to limit your indirect identification.

Insert the script associated with the questions – see Focus Group Worksheet.

**Scripted Interview Conclusion**

Thank you for taking the time to participate in the focus group. It is Tanya’s hope and mine too, that this research will support the Grade 8 team as it sustains its collaborative practice as well as add to the understanding of how such work could be initiated elsewhere

Tanya will be transcribing your answers and will provide a copy of your response. She has asked me to remind you that once she supplies the transcript, you will have two weeks to review it, revise, or remove content as you see appropriate. The end of that two-week period is the deadline for removing yourself and any of your personal data from the research project.
Appendix C continued

**Focus Group Worksheet**

These are the questions that will be asked in the Focus Group on March 12, 2018 starting 2:30 p.m. in E213. It is a place to jot ideas before or during the discussion and two reflection questions. Please hand this in at the end of the focus group. These will be used in the transcripts and destroyed when my final thesis is completed and accepted.

1. What is it like to be part of the collaborative team?
   a. What lead your team to build this collaboration?
   b. What impact do you think collaboration is having on your teaching practice?

2. What advice could your team give to others who aren’t in your context but want to make collaboration work?
   a. What is working well?
   b. What challenges did you have to overcome?
   c. What do you do to hold the relationships together when things get tough?
   d. What structures need to be in place?

3. What impact do you feel this has had on the students and their learning? How do you know?

4. You established a distributed leadership model. How do you see it impacting your participation in the team’s collaboration? Are there particular protocols you are using?
5. Attached is a *WordItOut* document with all the words you collectively used in the survey to describe your team. What do you notice? Would you change anything?

6. What do you feel is needed to sustain a collaboration like yours?

7. Are there any final questions or comments?

**Final Reflection on the discussion:**

1. What did we talk about in the group
2. What points did we make here?