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A Qualitative Study of Collaborative Lesson Planning for Teachers of Students With Significant Cognitive Disabilities

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A Qualitative Study of Collaborative Lesson Planning for Teachers of Students With Significant Cognitive Disabilities

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Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Wendy Lee under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

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Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

I have read the Code of Student Conduct and Academic Responsibility as described in the *Student Handbook* of Nova Southeastern University. This applied dissertation represents my original work, except where I have acknowledged the ideas, words, or material of other authors.

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Abstract

A Qualitative Study of Collaborative Lesson Planning for Teachers of Students With Significant Cognitive Disabilities. Wendy Lee, 2020: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education School of Criminal Justice. Keywords: collaborative lesson planning, teacher self-efficacy, professional learning community, high impact instructional strategies, high yield instructional strategies, generic qualitative research, special education, severe cognitive, severe intellectual, significant cognitive disabilities.

During the generic qualitative research, a system for facilitating collaborative lesson planning for teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities was developed and studied. The collaborative model allowed teachers to meet both school and district expectations for lesson plans. The purpose of the study, however, was to focus on the teachers' experience of participating in the collaborative lesson planning system.

Questions were asked of teachers at three points during the study: (a) during business as usual individual planning, (b) after 3 weeks of collaborative lesson planning training and practice, and (c) at the end of 6 weeks of PLC lesson planning participation. The focus of interview questions was on teachers' experiences in the process of planning, teacher self-efficacy, incorporating high impact instructional strategies, and meeting district and school expectations for preparing lessons.

Participants shared that participating in collaborative lesson planning and PLC meetings better equipped them to meet requirements for lesson planning, improves the overall quality of lesson plans, and positively impacts student achievement. Additionally, teachers recommended more protected planning time in which to develop better quality lesson plans. Planning lessons for students with significant cognitive disabilities takes more time since teachers have to create instructional materials and resources to meet the unique needs of the student population.

Future research should include conducting a similar study with a larger and more diverse sample. Another recommendation is to look at the viability of planning by department for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Finally, examining the impact of training teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities to implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in their lesson plans would be beneficial.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Teachers of students with disabilities have increased expectations placed on them. These expectations have become increasingly complex over the past decades, involving responsibilities for even more diverse student populations (Benedict, Brownell, Park, Bettini, & Lauterbach, 2014). Benedict et al. (2014) found that special education teachers require sophisticated knowledge and skills in order to meet these new responsibilities. Since many classes are self-contained, special education teachers of students with significant disabilities must be subject area experts for multiple subjects, unlike their general education counterparts who are only required to teach one or two content areas. Special education teachers provide instruction in multiple core content area subjects (math, reading, writing, science, and social studies) to students in varying grade levels, who are at many different cognitive levels of functioning. The teacher must also be able to manage problem behaviors in the classroom, collect and analyze data related to academics and behavior, and developing instructional materials required to teach the population of students with significant needs. Teachers are also responsible for writing individual education plans (IEPs) and monitoring data related to students' IEPs. In addition, there are increased academic expectations for students with disabilities. These expectations require special education teachers to be knowledgeable not only about working with students with disabilities, but also about the general education curriculum. Special education teachers must also be familiar with strategies for teaching students who are struggling in reading and math, and who are not able to demonstrate their knowledge in traditional ways.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed within this study was that special education teachers at a special education school were not completing lesson plans as required by the school and district. These special education teachers taught special education students in self-contained classrooms. There were multiple grade levels in each classroom, which required teachers to prepare lesson plans specific to the grade level students were in, as well as to address students' specific learning needs.

Phenomenon of interest. Students with significant cognitive disabilities and/or severe intellectual disabilities are often not remembered during school-wide discussions of student achievement. These students may be placed in self-contained classrooms in the back of the school and/or placed with teachers who are not properly equipped to deal with the different challenges associated with the student's disabilities. Teachers are assigned to classes with students with varying disabilities, students who are in multiple grade levels, students at varying academic levels, and students with sometimes severe aggression and/or self-injurious behaviors. These students work on Access Points and their progress is measured using alternate assessments to the state standards. Teachers are required to develop lesson plans and curriculum materials to meet the diverse needs of these students, and which align with the Access Points. In the target school serving secondary students with special needs, classes contained students in multiple grade levels which meant that teachers had to create lesson plans to meet multiple Access Points for each course to which students were assigned. Students were enrolled in six core courses and one elective course. This meant the teacher was responsible for creating six lesson plans addressing multiple Access Points each day.

Background and justification. Benedict et al. (2014) concluded that it is difficult for a special education teacher to become an expert and to be effective because of the broad range of special skills that is required to teach students with unique and significant educational needs. Further, the professional development (PD) provided to special education teachers has not kept pace with the increasing knowledge and skills these teachers are required to have. The PD that is available is often not aligned to the learning needs of individual special education teachers and is often too short in duration for the teacher to effectively process the new learning.

In her capacity as assistant principal at a separate day school serving students with special needs, the researcher found that some teachers had not completing lesson plans as required by the school and district. Teachers reported being too overwhelmed by their daily responsibilities to write the lesson plans as required. Teachers had one planning period during the school day (45 minutes), and another approximately 55 minutes at the end of the school day; however, the teacher-planning period was often interrupted due to IEP meetings, parent conferences, student behavior issues, or other trainings and/or meetings. In addition, some teachers lacked understanding of how to write a quality lesson plan. Classes contained students in multiple grades levels, many of whom had severe disabilities, including significant cognitive disabilities and/or severe behavioral challenges. Most classes included students who were non-verbal; these students used pictures or gestures to communicate. Some students have physical disabilities in addition to their cognitive disabilities, which also impacted their ability to learn. Teachers at this school were assigned to a team for either middle and high school (the academic program) or the vocational training program. During weekly Professional Learning Community

(PLC) meetings, teachers divided responsibilities for completing lesson plans based on subjects. When the team did not have enough teachers, some subjects would go unassigned, resulting in no lesson plans for that subject area. Even with divided responsibilities, some teachers still did not complete lesson plans for their assigned subjects, and those teachers who attempted to do so were not writing quality plans that incorporated all components as outlined in the district/school template. The result was that essential Access Points and standards were not being covered, teachers were complaining of being overwhelmed by the requirements, and those teachers who were writing lesson plans felt it was unfair for them to be doing their part, while other members of their team were not pulling their weight. Hunter, Jasper, and Williamson (2014) found that trying to coordinate lesson planning for a common group of diverse students can lead to teachers becoming frustrated.

Deficiencies in the evidence. There is an abundance of research about special education, teaching methods, professional learning communities, and teacher collaboration; however, there was limited research that addressed collaborative lesson planning among teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities. The researcher was unable to locate any study that examined the experience of teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities and their perspectives about the potential benefits or frustrations of participating in PLCs to help develop lesson plans.

Audience. Teachers of students with significant disabilities, school district leaders, school building administrators, and teacher leaders may all benefit from reading this dissertation. The writer developed and implemented a collaborative lesson planning system at a center school that served students with disabilities in a southeastern state. The

collaborative lesson planning system was designed for teachers of students with significant disabilities to allow teachers to meet both school and district expectations for developing lesson plans and increasing teacher efficacy and morale. The goal of the lesson planning system was to address issues that would ultimately have a positive impact on student achievement. Teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities benefit from hearing the perspectives of teachers of similar students. The purpose of this generic qualitative research was to learn firsthand from the teachers about the experience of planning lessons for students with significant disabilities before implementation of the collaborative lesson planning sessions began, 3 weeks after beginning collaborative lesson planning sessions, and again after 6 weeks of collaborative lesson planning and practice. District leaders, school building administrators, and teacher leaders will benefit from understanding the experiences of teachers planning lessons for students with significant cognitive disabilities at the target school. The researcher learned and will share important insight into elements of the collaborative planning sessions that were beneficial as well as any elements that were not beneficial during the proposed study, all for the ultimate purpose of improving student achievement.

Definition of Terms

Specific definitions have been adopted for the following terms.

Access Points. Access Points are expectations written for students with significant cognitive disabilities to access the general education curriculum. They reflect the core intent of the standards with reduced levels of complexity (Florida State University, 2017).

Florida standards (standards). Florida standards are expectations of what

students in Florida should know and be able to do from kindergarten through grade 12 (Project 10, 2019).

> **Individual education plans (IEPs)**. An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a plan or program developed to ensure that a child with an identified disability who is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives specialized instruction and related services. The IEP is developed by a team of individuals from various educational disciplines, the child with a disability, family members, and/or designated advocates. ("What is an Individualized Education Plan," 2019, para. 1)

Professional development (PD). Bolam (as cited in Avidov-Ungar, 2016) defined professional development as "the constant development of knowledge and professional skills throughout one's career in education" (p. 654). It involves active learning and reflection and is an ongoing process in which teachers adapt what they know to their specific context (Girvan, Conneely, & Tangney, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

According to Hunter et al. (2014), multiple authors emphasized the importance of common planning time (CPT) and credits this as having direct benefits to educators involved since CPT provides opportunities for educators to learn from each other while increasing their personal efficacy. They further stated this is "due to the fact that they can collaborate with other educators and share their problems or issues related to teaching" (p. 115). The purpose of this study was to develop and implement a system at the target school for facilitating collaborative lesson planning for teachers of students with special needs who have significant disabilities. The model allowed teachers to meet both school

and district expectations for lesson plans and increase teacher efficacy and morale, which may ultimately have a positive impact on student achievement. The primary purpose of this generic qualitative research, then, was to learn directly from the participating teachers about their experiences of participating in the collaborative lesson planning system.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature as it relates to collaborative lesson planning for teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities. In this chapter, the researcher discussed how the literature review was conducted. In addition, the following major topics were discussed: (a) students with significant cognitive disabilities, (b) high impact, high yield instructional strategies, (c) teacher self-efficacy, (d) professional learning communities (PLCs), (e) benefits and challenges of collaborative lesson planning, and (f) the research method, generic qualitative research.

The researcher conducted searches of the literature in the Nova Southeastern Alvin Sherman Library. Databases reviewed included ERIC ProQuest and Sage. The following key terms were searched: collaborative lesson planning, teacher self-efficacy, professional learning community, high impact instructional strategies, high yield instructional strategies, generic qualitative research, qualitative research, special education, severe cognitive, severe intellectual, and significant cognitive disabilities. Delimitations included peer reviewed, scholarly articles, and the years 2014 to 2019.

Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities

It is well documented that students with severe intellectual disabilities have significant cognitive impairments which impact their ability to learn, thereby resulting in these students experiencing significant difficulties in learning grade level content (Downing, 2008, as cited in Jones & Lawson, 2015; Orelove, Sobsey, & Silbermans, 2004, as cited in Jones & Lawson, 2015). Historically, there has been very little focus on literacy for these students (Browder, Gibbs, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Courtade, & Mraz, 2009). Due to their highly intensive and variable learning needs, students with severe intellectual

disabilities present significant challenges to their teachers and require extensive supports (Courtade, Test, & Cook, 2015). These students require intensive instruction in order to develop academic skills, yet there is very little research available which outlines common instructional practices for this unique population. Often, these students' teachers are tasked with helping them master academic standards, as well as with developing social, and adaptive skill repertoires (Pennington & Courtade, 2015). Pennington and Courtade (2015) found that students in separate schools were less engaged than their peers in traditional schools and were often passive participants in the instructional process. According to Browder et al. (2012), teachers of students with multiple disabilities are often not familiar with the standards they are tasked with teaching and are of the view that the general curriculum may not be relevant for this population of students. Jones and Lawson (2015) argued that this population of students often has additional sensory and physical disabilities and experience communication difficulties which make it necessary for special education teachers to have knowledge of a variety of successful pedagogical strategies and approaches. Courtade, Test, and Cook (2015) concluded "there is still much work to be done to ensure students with severe intellectual disability receive the most effective instruction possible" (p. 315).

While some question the use of standards-based instruction and focusing on grade-level standards for students with severe disabilities, on the premises that it usurps time that should be spent on teaching functional literacy and math skills, Courtade, Spooner, Browder, and Jimenez (2011) proposed that "a standards-based curriculum provides students with severe disabilities a full educational opportunity", and does not need to preclude instruction that is personally relevant. Browder et al. (2009), in their

discussion of literacy for students with significant cognitive disabilities, found that there is a lack of focus on literacy for this population. Students with signification cognitive disabilities are often non-readers which inhibits their ability to be successful academically and in the real-world setting. Browder et al. (2009) stated that historically, students with severe developmental disabilities have had little focus on literacy, and that when reading instruction was provides it focused on survival words that the student would encounter in daily living (p. 270). The authors identified three main reasons why literacy is deemphasized with this population. According to Browder et al., the first can be associated with the fact that some people view students with significant cognitive disabilities are less competent. Their level of competence to learn academic content is often associated with their IQ scores. The second reason stems from the view that with the limited cognitive ability of this population, instructional time would be better spent learning functional sight words versus learning decoding, as this will benefit them more as they move about society. The final reason is that students' deficits in language and communication skills would prevent them from learning to read.

Browder et al. (2009) stated that for each of the arguments listed above, there are counter arguments. First, with new accountability laws and expectations, schools and districts are now being held accountable for the learning of all students, including students with significant cognitive disabilities. There are now many websites which outline literacy targets for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Secondly, there are now broader approaches to literacy which emphasize teaching more than survival and/or sight words to this population. Thirdly, advances in technology, and especially assistive technology, are creating viable options for the communication challenges of

these students, making it easier for them to participate in literacy instruction. Browder et al. agreed that there are challenges in acquiring literacy skills for students with moderate and severe developmental disabilities as many of these students may be completely nonverbal or use assistive technology for communication which make learning most early literacy skills involving oral language challenging. “This creates a mismatch between the focus of most early literacy curricula and the chronological age and grade level of many students with severe developmental disabilities” (Browder et al., 2009, p. 271). The authors stated that is it important to teach skills that will have both short term and long-term utility so students with moderate to severe disabilities will be able to transfer the literacy skills gained to daily life after high school. Browder et al. (2009) suggested that education for students with severe disabilities should result in improved quality of life and that the benefits can be either immediate (recognizing one’s name) or long term (being able to decode a passage of interest). The authors concluded that the “only way to determine who can learn to read is through teaching reading skills” (Browder et al., 2009, p. 271).

Courtade et al. (2011) found that we do not yet know the potential students with severe disabilities have to learn complex academic content, or how this may benefit them in their daily lives. Further, “what we know about the potential of students with severe disabilities to learn academic content has been severely restricted by educators’ own priorities” (p. 4). Ayers, Lowrey, Douglas, and Sievers (2011) cautioned educators that while they should “have high expectations for their students and seek to challenge their students at appropriate levels” (p. 11), teaching them “fragments of higher level academic skills should not be achieved at the cost of learning how to function independently in

society" (p. 11). As such, Browder et al. (2009) recommended that education for students with severe disabilities be age appropriate with increased access to both fiction and nonfiction literature, along with high emphasis on teaching students to read during their early elementary years, providing instruction in reading along with assistance in learning to recognize and apply sight words during upper elementary and middle school years, and transitioning to more functional activities during the high school years. Browder et al. (2009) stated that "students with severe disabilities may take longer to acquire new skills and may need opportunities to practice these skills in the context in which they are typically used" (p. 272).

While functional literacy is important to give students with severe disabilities access to their community, Browder et al. (2009) suggested that it is equally important to provide opportunities and instruction on how to read for personal interests and enjoyment. For students who are unable to read, this access can be provided by reading to students, as this is a long-standing way to promote and increase early literacy skills in all students. Teachers may provide supports to students with severe developmental disabilities during read-aloud activities by using concrete objects and materials to help students make meaning of the text. Browder et al. (2009) explained that read alouds for older students with severe developmental disabilities should be both age and grade appropriate with adaptations made for the students' assigned grade level which may be different from their reading level. Students with severe developmental disabilities will also require explicit instruction on how to access and engage with books/literature. Tasks like identifying the title of the story or passage, how to identify the author of the book/story, how navigate a chapter book, how and when to turn the page, how to track

text in the passage, how to identify key vocabulary, and how to use picture cues to determine meaning are all things that would need to be explicitly taught.

Browder et al. (2009) claimed that it is important that students with severe developmental disabilities be provided opportunities to learn to read in primary grades. Teachers need to work to increase students' independence as readers as they progress in age and move the focus on teaching functional sight words to later grade levels. Courtade et al. (2011) suggested that skills that are important for students with severe disabilities to learn should be included as IEP objectives where they may be taught during the school day alongside a standards-based curriculum. Courtade et al. (2011) argued that allowing students with severe disabilities access to a standards-based curriculum prepares them to function as adults in the community and adds to the options they have as adults for jobs, leisure activities, and overall independence. Courtade et al. (2011) reminded us that students with severe disabilities are members of a larger community where they do more than cross the street and go to the grocery store or to fast food restaurants. Students with disabilities travel both nationally, and internationally; therefore, having a vocabulary and experiences to draw on that can help them communicate about the broader world will provide a better foundation for their adult social interactions.

Courtade et al. (2011) found that educators need to consider how to teach grade level standards to students with severe disabilities, while making the instruction relevant to their daily lives. For example, teaching students how to use algebra to solve job tasks. The authors stated that there is "no research indicating that students cannot learn academic content until functional skills are mastered" (p. 5). Further, teaching a standards-based curriculum is not a replacement for teaching relevant functional skills.

Courtade et al. (2011) postulated that educators must collaborate with the families of students with severe developmental disabilities to determine what parts of the functional curriculum (high priority life skills) will be most beneficial to the individual student when taught at school. There will be some tasks, such as showering, that may need to be taught at home, given the limited number of instructional hours available in the school day.

Ayers et al. (2011) agreed that students with disabilities can make progress in all areas; further, a standards-based curriculum and a functional curriculum both have benefits to students with severe developmental disabilities and should not be exclusive. Educators will have to balance the old with the new and find creative ways to balance teaching academic standards and functional skills. One suggestion was while teaching students inquiry science, the teacher may also incorporate functional skills such as washing hands after the experiment. Ayers et al. (2011) are of the view that "educational targets should be based on what student can currently do, both academically and functionally" (p. 12). According to Ayers et al. (2011) "progress is not the acquisition of useless knowledge and/or skills; rather educational progress is the acquisition of knowledge and skills toward the eventual outcome of mastery" (p. 17). The authors are of the view that educators "should continue to increase real outcomes for students by focusing on students as individuals with specific preferences and needs resulting in a meaningful curricular development for each and every student" (p. 18).

Browder et al. (2009) and Courtade et al. (2009) agreed that it is difficult to function as an adult with few to no academic skills. This would mean having to rely on others to manage finances, decipher mail, and translate everyday events like the weather;

therefore, it behooves educators to provide a balanced curriculum of standards-based instruction and high priority life skills with many opportunities to practice and generalize concepts.

High Impact, High Yield Instructional Strategies

Not all instructional strategies are equally effective (Fink, 2016). High impact strategies are educational practices that reliably increase student learning and seem to result in high student achievement results when used. High impact strategies are not infallible but have a proven record of increasing the chances of students learning when compared with other strategies (Fink, 2016; Department of Education and Training Melbourne, 2017). In recent years, it has been noted that students do not take responsibility for their own learning. It then falls on the teacher to determine what students need to know and how best to teach the content. With the limited time and resources teachers have, coupled with the other barriers faced by teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities, it is necessary to maximize instructional time by utilizing instructional strategies that can create high levels of student engagement and learning (Fink, 2016). There are many different thoughts on which instructional strategies have the most positive impact on student achievement.

In a study evaluating strategies to teach secondary math and science content to students with moderate and severe developmental disabilities, Browder et al. (2012) found that while "addressing standards is a relatively new challenge for teachers of students with moderate and severe developmental disabilities" (p. 15), teachers may consider using a math problem story along with a task analysis of the problem-solving steps, and a graphic organizer to teach math. Science may be taught by teaching science

vocabulary, the inquiry process, and utilizing hands-on experiments. Fink (2016) posited that helping students become meta-learners, having a learning-centered course design, using small group instruction in a powerful way, engaging in service-learning opportunities, and being a leader with one's students are practices that yield a high impact on student achievement. Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) postulated that identifying similarities and differences, summarizing and note taking, reinforcing effort and providing recognition, homework and practice, nonlinguistic representations, cooperative learning, setting objectives and providing feedback, generating and testing hypothesis, and questions, cues, and advance organizers are nine high yield instructional strategies that have a proven record of increasing student achievement. This aligns with the findings from the Department of Education and Training Melbourne (2017) which listed setting goals, structuring lessons, explicit teaching, worked examples, collaborative learning, multiple exposures, questioning, feedback, metacognitive strategies, and differentiated teaching as the top 10 instructional practices that have proven to reliably increase student learning when applied.

Browder et al. (2012), Courtade, Spooner, Browder, and Jimenez (2012), and Spooner, Knight, Browder, and Smith (2010) suggested that the use of research-based instructional practices that include task analysis and time delay along with standards-based curriculum, are beneficial to students with moderate and severe disabilities. Spooner et al. (2010) proposed that "the strongest support was found for using task analytic instruction to teach chained skills and for using time delay to teach discrete skills" (p. 69). Exposing these students to literature and providing opportunities for them to read and be read to will help increase their literacy skills. Browder et al. (2009)

concluded that students with severe developmental delays should be exposed to both narrative and informational text. Also, as students move up in grade levels (elementary to secondary), the focus on literacy should be adapted to meet the needs of the student. While at the elementary level, it is beneficial to teach the mechanics of reading; at the secondary level, the focus should include ensuring that students acquire and use relevant functional sight words. Courtade et al., (2012) found that while curriculum for students with severe disabilities has been evolving, exposing students to a standards-based curriculum provides these students with a full educational opportunity which can and should include instruction that is personally relevant to students.

Teacher Self-Efficacy

Teacher self-efficacy may be defined as one's idea or perspective about their ability or capability to effect desired outcomes of student engagement and learning (Dixon, Yssel, McConnell, & Hardin, 2014). Bandura (1997) described perceived self-efficacy as one's belief in their ability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments. He posited that belief in one's efficacy influences what challenges a person may choose to take on, the amount of effort they put into the endeavor, how long they will persevere when obstacles arise and how resilient they are when facing adverse circumstances.

Self-efficacy beliefs influence teachers' instructional practices and other outcomes related to student achievement. Holzberger, Philipp, and Kunter (2013) and Sehgal, and Mishra (2016) confirmed that a positive relationship exists between teacher self-efficacy beliefs and the three aspects of teacher effectiveness; specifically, delivery of instruction, teacher facilitation of teacher student interactions, and regulation of

student learning which indicates that a teacher's belief in their ability is a major contributor to teacher effectiveness.

According to Poulou, Reddy, and Dudek (2018), a curvilinear relationship exists with years of teaching experience and teacher self-efficacy where self-efficacy increases in early and mid-career, levels out in mid-career, and then declines in later career stages. The authors also found that in addition to changing over the course of a school year, teacher self-efficacy can also increase as a result of experiences of success in the classroom. Sehgal and Mishra (2016) found that collaboration with other teachers along with healthy interpersonal processes helps enhance teaching quality and improves the academic outcomes of students. In addition, the researchers found that the school leader through their feedback to teachers has significant influence over teacher self-efficacy, as does school and organizational culture.

With this being confirmed, it is important for school leaders to focus on building a school culture that supports and positively influences teacher self-efficacy. Further, that school leaders put systems and processes in place that can improve or increase teacher self-efficacy as it is not success itself that impacts self-efficacy, but rather the cognitive process of success (Holzberger et al., 2013). This means that feedback and diagnostic information that teachers receive in the classroom should be appropriately processed or filtered to have a positive influence on teacher self-efficacy. Enhancing teachers' professional practice and use of high yield instructional strategies should also be a priority focus as Poulou et al., (2018) suggested that teachers who have a higher sense of self-efficacy tend to use instructional practices focused more on creativity, and understanding, while teachers with lower levels of self-efficacy demonstrate a more

performance oriented approach to instruction.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

There has been growing concern about the effectiveness of traditional professional development. Lenski and Caskey (2009) found that a growing trend in professional development is to move away from the traditional workshop approach to the implementation of communities of practice which encourage teachers to work together to solve educational problems. In order to improve instructional practices in our schools we must invest in professional development activities that are proven to show improvements in teaching and learning (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). Garet et al. (2001) posited that professional development designed for a group of teachers, especially those from the same school or grade level, and/or those who share the same groups of students has several advantages. First, teachers can discuss concepts, skills, and problems that may come up during the professional development. Second, since they are from the same school or grade level, they may share curriculum materials and assessment requirements, and by working together they can implement what they learn in their instructional context. Third, because of shared students, they may be able to discuss specific student concerns.

Lenski and Caskey (2009) suggested that as teachers collaborate with others in professional learning communities, they are collectively examining practices and functioning as communities of practice. In this environment, teachers can build on their collective wisdom as they interact with each other and examine how best to engage students in learning the content. Lesnki and Caskey (2009) concluded that "when

teachers meet in professional learning communities to discuss planning, they become active participants in reform" (p. 56).

Recent changes in the field of education necessitate a new approach to teacher professional development which is high quality and sustainable. It is to this end that educators need to move toward a more collaborative approach (Rock & Wilson, 2005). Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) posited that a PLC is a learning community that has the ability to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals that participate in the community, and that has the ability to positively impact both teaching practice, and student achievement. Williams, Brien, Sprague, and Sullivan (2008) as well as Vescio et al. (2008) identified five essential characteristics shared by most PLCs: shared values and norms with regard to view about children's ability to learn; collective responsibility; reflective dialogue among teachers about curriculum, instruction, and student development; professional collaboration; and promotion of professional learning. Vescio et al., (2008) discussed the paradigm shift that has occurred over the past 20 years which sees professional development moving beyond just supporting the acquisition of new skills and knowledge by teachers. Instead, teachers are being required to rethink their own practice and reflect on how to collaboratively work with colleagues to enhance student learning. According to Vescio et al., (2008), the core foundation of a PLC rests on "improving student learning by improving teaching practice" (p. 82). The authors suggested that as teachers engage in PLCs, their focus becomes more student-centered and their teaching practices will change. Teachers will move from working in silos to being more open with their practices and being more willing to collaborate and share ideas and effective strategies with others. This ongoing collaboration which involves

sharing, reflecting, and taking risks, results in a change in the school culture which then moves toward a greater focus on student learning, more teacher authority, and continuous teacher learning.

The process of successfully transforming schools into professional learning communities may be impacted by internal characteristics of the school. Namely, organizational characteristics, operational characteristics, and systemic trust. According to William et al. (2008), the culture of the school is critical to the effectiveness of PLC. A focus on learning rather than teaching, a routine focus on formative assessments and pedagogy, school leaders who communicate their belief in PLCs and create structures that ensure shared leadership and decision making, and capacity-building are indicators that may have a positive effect on cultivating a successful PLC culture. In addition, well researched and facilitated professional development, system-wide trust between teachers and school leaders, and the systematic collection and use of data to guide instruction all affect the sustainability of PLCs. Vescio et al. (2008) concluded that the focus of the PLC on developing teacher's knowledge of practice around the issue of student learning ultimately benefits students, as over time there is an increase in student learning and achievement.

Benefits and Challenges of Collaborative Lesson Planning

Due to increased demands that are placed on teachers to provide standards-based instruction, teachers and school leaders are searching for more efficient ways to plan lessons that meet students' individual needs (Courey, Tappe, Siker, & LePage, 2012). According to Straub and Alias (2013), new standards in education require increased literacy for students thereby necessitating a new level of collaboration and expertise for

teachers This is especially true of teachers and schools that serve students with significant disabilities. The goal is to make the content more accessible to all students. Engaging in collaborative lesson planning supports teachers' efforts to meet this challenge by incorporating strategies and ideas from multiple professionals on how best to teach the content.

McLeskey (2011) described the emergence of a new form of professional development for teachers which focuses on personal growth and collaboration. McLeskey is of the view that when teachers are "active participants in identifying, learning about, adapting, and using instructional strategies to improve classroom practice", teachers will have "power over change in their classrooms" (p. 28). Professional development can then become a "collaborative endeavor involving groups of teachers and other professionals who can contribute to teacher learning and improved practice" (p. 28).

Rimpola (2014) summarized that teachers who engage in collaborative work can learn from each other as they share their knowledge about teaching strategies and what they have found to be successful in the past. While teachers may find this challenging at first due to the difficulty in coordinating planning time, differences in pedagogy, and differences in teaching styles; teachers soon realize that benefits such as shared responsibility, being intellectually engaged with other professionals, and having access to specific knowledge and expertise that other teachers may have make the collaboration worthwhile. In addition, the social aspect of collaborative lesson planning can also help increase teachers' sense of belonging and self-efficacy.

Sehgal and Mishra (2017) found that if schools want to improve, they need to focus on providing time and opportunities for teachers to collaborate, and reward teachers

for using this time effectively. The researchers concluded that teachers are not going to collaborate effectively just because it is mandated. They posited that principals need to provide support to facilitate effective collaboration through physical resources, motivation, goal setting, and training.

Generic Qualitative Research

Qualitative research methods are considered nonexperimental and the focus is on understanding the how and why of systems. Yilmaz (2013) defined qualitative research as an "emergent, inductive, interpretive and naturalistic approach to the study of people, cases, phenomena, social situations and processes in their natural settings in order to reveal in descriptive terms the meanings that people attach to their experiences of the world" (p. 312). Generic qualitative research "investigates people's reports of their subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on their experiences, of things in the outer world" (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015, p. 76). It is not guided by any explicit set of philosophical assumptions like most of the other known forms of qualitative research (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003). Caelli et al. (2003) found that there isn't a lot of literature to review on generic qualitative research which makes it difficult for researchers who are interested in implementing this type of study. Percy et al. (2015) explained that generic qualitative research focuses on participants' experience with the phenomenon and what each participant thinks about the issue. The attention is outward focused and takes into consideration thoughtful description and reflection of past occurrences. Generic qualitative research "is appropriate when a fully qualitative survey approach is desired" (Percy et al., 2015). This research method rarely uses unstructured data collection methods. The aim is to elicit people's thoughts about things that are outside of

themselves. Therefore, it utilizes semi or fully structured interviews, questionnaires, surveys, content- or activity-specific participant observation, and the like and attempts to gather a wide range of opinions, ideas, or reflections (Percy et al., 2015). Percy et al. (2015) found that occasionally, "a small, non-representative, but highly informed sample can provide rich information about the topic" (p. 79). Yilmax (2013 and Caelli et al. (2003) concluded that researchers should share any assumptions they make about the topic of study and ensure that there is alignment between the research questions and the research approach utilized. It is important to explicitly share any predispositions that may affect the researcher's collection, analysis, or interpretation of the data gathered. In addition, it is beneficial to include quotes from participants in the research. The authors identified four data analysis processes that may be used with a generic qualitative approach: thematic analysis, inductive analysis, theoretical analysis, and thematic analysis with constant comparison. In summary, the authors agreed that with generic qualitative research, knowledge is construed and is not static or fixed, but is flexible and can change. In addition, since the data are shaped by views and value systems of the participants, there may be multiple interpretations of findings.

Research Questions

The researcher learned directly from teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities about their experiences of planning lessons for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Questions were asked of teachers at three points during the study: (a) during business as usual individual planning prior to the implementation of Professional Learning Community (PLC) planning sessions, (b) after 3 weeks of collaborative lesson planning in newly forms PLCs, and (c) at the end of 6 weeks of PLC

lesson planning participation. The focus of interview questions was on teachers' experiences in terms of the process of planning, teacher self-efficacy, incorporating high impact instructional strategies, and meeting district and school expectations for preparing lessons.

Research Question 1 (before beginning collaborative planning PLC meetings). What was the experience of individually planning detailed lessons for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenge prior to implementing PLC lesson planning sessions?

Research Question 2 (after 3 weeks of collaborative planning PLC meetings). What was the experience of learning to plan lessons for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenges together in a Professional Learning Community (PLC)?

Research Question 3 (after 6 weeks of collaborative lesson planning PLC meetings). What was the experience of planning lessons for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenges together in a PLC after learning and practicing the way of work?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study was to learn directly from teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities about their experiences of planning lessons for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Questions were asked of teachers at three points during the study: (a) during business as usual individual planning prior to the implementation of Professional Learning Community (PLC) planning sessions, (b) after 3 weeks of collaborative lesson planning training and practice in newly formed PLCs, and (c) at the end of 6 weeks of PLC lesson planning participation. The focus of interview questions was on teachers' experiences in terms of the process of planning, teacher self-efficacy, incorporating high impact instructional strategies, and meeting district and school expectations for preparing lessons.

Qualitative Research Approach

The primary purpose of this generic qualitative research was to learn directly from the participating teachers about their experiences of participating in the collaborative lesson planning system. Jacob and Furgerson (2012) posited that the desire to expose the human part of a story is at the heart of qualitative research. Percy et al. (2015) stated that generic qualitative research "investigates people's reports of their subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on their experiences" (p. 78). The research was a generic qualitative study of the experiences of a group of special education teachers teaching students with significant learning needs on Access Points. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with participants using semi-structured interview protocols as this "offers a more flexible approach to the interview process" (Ryan, Coughlan, and Cronin,

2009, p. 310). A semi-structured interview allowed for the exploration of spontaneous issues raised by the interviewee as well as for unanticipated responses (Ryan et al. 2009). Percy et al. (2015) found that semi-structured interview protocols are better suited to elicit people's take and ideas on external events. The interviews were recorded, and the data transcribed and analyzed.

Participants

After approval from the school district, Nova Southeastern University's (NSU) Institutional Review Board (IRB), and the school site administration, the researcher solicited voluntary participation from teachers in the academic program to participate in interviews about their experiences of completing lesson plans for students with significant cognitive disabilities who are being instructed on Access Points. Justification for targeting this group of teachers is that since the problem was observed at this site, the researcher wanted like to understand the challenges faced by teachers of students on Access Points who have significant cognitive disabilities and are taught in self-contained classrooms with multiple grade levels in each class in order to possibly develop a way to solve the issue. Teachers were asked to share their experiences of participating in collaborative lesson planning with targeted professional development. All teachers of students with significant learning needs at the target site who teach in the academic program were invited to participate in the study (the Professional Learning Community participation was expected, but participation in the face-to-face individual interviews for the study was completely voluntary). There were currently eight teachers in the academic program including two males and six females. There were two Hispanic, one Black, one Asian, and two White female teachers. Both male teachers were Black.

There was one teacher vacancy, with that classroom being covered by a permanent substitute. Teachers ranged in age from 35 to 64 years of age, with teaching experience ranging from a first-year teacher to a teacher with over 20 years in the classroom. Invitations to participate were sent via email.

Data Collection Tool

The primary research instrument for this study was a semi-structured interview with participants geared towards understanding the experiences of each teacher at three points during a change process toward collaborative lesson planning. The semi-structured interview was conducted using an interview protocol to gather information on the teachers' ideas about, and experiences with, collaborative lesson planning. Teachers were individually interviewed on campus at three points during the study timeframe: prior to beginning Professional Learning Communities in which collaborative lesson planning will be taught, midway through the training/practice process 3 weeks after beginning weekly PLCs, and finally at the end of 6 weeks of PLCs (see the appendix for the interview protocol).

Procedures

After receiving approval from the Nova Southeastern University's Institutional Review Board and the school district's office of Research, Accountability, and Grants, the researcher solicited volunteers from the school's academic program to participate in interview sessions. The data collection tool was the semi structured interview protocol which guided face-to-face interviews. Jacob and Furgerson (2012) indicated that "when we interview people, we share their stories" (p. 1). The interviewer took notes during the interviews to highlight points that were of interest or that necessitated further clarifying

questions. Interviewees were oriented to the purpose of the study and participants were encouraged to respond honestly to the questions asked. As suggested by Jacob and Furgerson (2012), a script was used from the beginning to the end of the interview process. Basic questions to gather background data on the interviewee were included at the beginning of the interview. The main questions in the interview protocol aligned with the research questions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. After the final interviews, transcripts were analyzed to determine major themes for each interview question.

Data Analysis

Data were collected via interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol. After each interview, data were transcribed, and each participant had the opportunity to review the transcript and provide feedback or corrections. The data were then be analyzed using thematic analysis with constant comparison as described by Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015). In this data analysis method, the data collected were analyzed as they were collected, and each subsequent participant's data were analyzed and compared to the previously analyzed data. Percy et al. (2015) stated that "the analysis constantly moves back and forth between current data and the data that have already been coded and clustered into patterns. Patterns and themes will change and grow as the analysis continues" (p. 83). The researcher reviewed and familiarized herself with the data collected from the first participant. Paragraphs, sentences, and phrases that were meaningful were highlighted. The highlighted data areas were compared with the research questions and all data not related to the research questions were eliminated or moved to a different area for future reevaluation. Each set of data was coded according to

the research question or sub-question it related to. Related data were clustered as patterns began to develop. After coding and clustering the first participant's data, each subsequent participant's data were analyzed and compared to the previously analyzed data, thereby constantly comparing and contrasting data being analyzed with previously analyzed data in the study. Related patterns and themes were combined and clustered throughout the analysis process. At the end of the analysis, the researcher wrote a detailed analysis describing the scope and sequences of each theme, supported by direct quotes from interviewees which better explain the perspective of the participant. The data were then "synthesized together to form composite synthesis of the question under inquiry" (Percy et al., 2015, p. 84).

Ethical Considerations

Ryan et al. (2009) concluded that the "protection of participants' rights is a fundamental aspect of conducting an interview, and the issues of informed consent and anonymity and confidentiality are of paramount importance" (p. 312). The researcher solicited approval from the Nova Southeastern University Institutional Review Board and the school district's office of Research, Accountability and Grants. All participants participated voluntarily in the study and received an orientation that fully explained the purpose of the study and participant rights to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were also assured that their responses would be kept confidential and that their identity would not be disclosed. Written consent was obtained from each participant and this was verified prior to commencing interviews. Steps were taken to ensure that interview tapes and transcripts did not contain any identifiable features, and all stored data were kept on password protected devices. After the interviews, the transcribed

transcripts were shared with participants so, as a form of member checking, they could check for accuracy of the transcribed data and provide clarification on any area of misunderstanding.

Trustworthiness

The terms validity, credibility, and rigor are sometimes used synonymously with trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005). In order to ensure trustworthiness of this research, the researcher implemented the research as designed and approved by the IRB. Other factors that may have impact trustworthiness include subjectivity, bias, bias adequacy of data, and adequacy of interpretation. In order to address issues related to subjectivity and potential bias, the researcher made her own implicit assumptions and potential biases overt to herself and others and took steps to ensure that measures such as participant review of transcribed interview responses to check that the researcher's own interpretations were not unduly influencing the findings. To counteract issues related to adequacy of data and of interpretation, the researcher ensured that the interview protocol included questions geared towards soliciting quality responses from interviewees. There was also a research-based data analysis protocol in place to adequately review and interpret the data to arrive at overarching themes and findings. The researcher was immersed in the data beginning with the data gathering process and continuing through to the transcription of interviews. Morrow (2005) found that "these repeated forays into the data ultimately lead the investigator to a deep understanding of all that comprises the data corpus (body of data) and how its parts interrelate" (p. 256).

Potential Research Bias

The researcher has worked in the field of education for over 16 years. The last 11

years have been as an administrator at a school serving students with significant cognitive disabilities. In the researcher's capacity as an administrator supervising teachers who serve students with significant cognitive disabilities in self-contained classrooms, the researcher was aware of the challenges faced by the teachers as they develop lessons to meet the unique needs of these students.

Being aware of this potential research bias, the researcher carefully examined how to not let personal feelings and attitudes color the lens of the interviews. Therefore, the decision was made to have a script for the beginning and end of the interview and to adhere to the questions outlined in the interview protocol as much as possible (see the interview protocol in the appendix). In addition, the researcher practiced the interview questions several times to ensure that there are no leading tones or cues during the interview.

Limitations

The research was conducted at one school involving six teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities who were on Access Points. The views, ideas, and feelings expressed by these teachers may be unique to the setting of the research and may not necessarily reflect the views of all special education teachers or all teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities. In addition, although participation in the research was voluntary and the participants were encouraged to provide honest responses to the questions, due to the supervisory role the researcher held at the school, teachers may not necessarily have respond openly and honestly, and may not have expressed their true feelings during the interview.

Chapter 4: Findings

Teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities experience challenges with planning and implementing lessons to meet the needs of their students. The purpose of this study was to learn directly from teachers about their experiences of participating in a newly designed collaborative lesson planning system.

Participants

Six certified teachers who taught students with significant cognitive disabilities, who were being educated via Access Points in self-contained classrooms, were interviewed for this study. The teachers taught multiple subjects to students including courses in Access English, Access Math, Access Science, Access History, Access Health, and Access HOPE. The teachers also taught career exploration courses such as Career Prep and Career Experience.

Participants' Backgrounds

Participant 1 (P1). This participant is a male, African American teacher. This participant taught high school students with varying disabilities in a self-contained classroom. Students in this class were in various programs including Autism and the Intellectual Disabilities programs. Some students received language therapy and some students were non-verbal. Most students in this class demonstrated severe behavioral challenges including aggression towards others and property destruction. This participant had prior experience teaching juveniles in a juvenile detention center setting.

Participant 2 (P2). This participant is a White female teacher. This participant taught middle and high school students in a self-contained classroom. Students in this class were in the Intellectual Disabilities program and were medically fragile. Students in

this class required hand-over-hand assistance for all learning activities.

Participant 3 (P3). This participant is a female, African American teacher. This participant taught high school students in a self-contained classroom. Students in this class were in the Intellectual Disabilities and Autism programs and received language therapy. All students demonstrated problem behaviors including physical aggression and property destruction. All except one student was non-verbal.

Participant 4 (P4). This participant is a male, African American teacher. This participant taught middle and high school students with varying disabilities in a self-contained classroom. Students in this class were in various programs including Autism, Emotional Behavior Disorder, and the Intellectual Disabilities programs. Some students received language therapy. All students were verbal. Some students in this class demonstrated problem behaviors including aggression towards others and property destruction.

Participant 5 (P5). This participant is a White Hispanic female teacher. This participant taught middle school students with varying disabilities in a self-contained classroom. Students in this class were in the various programs including Autism and the Intellectual Disabilities programs. Some students received language therapy. All students were non-verbal. Students in this class demonstrated few challenging behaviors including non-compliance.

Participant 6 (P6). This participant is an Asian female teacher. This participant taught high school students with varying disabilities in a self-contained classroom. Students in this class were in the various programs including Autism and the Intellectual Disabilities programs. Some students received language therapy. All students were

verbal. One student demonstrated challenging behaviors including non-compliance and property destruction. This participant had previous experience at a traditional school setting which departmentalized instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

Summary of Participants

There were four female teachers and two male teachers who participated in this study. The years of experience for the teachers ranged from three to 20 years. The teachers were all current teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities in self-contained classrooms who were being educated via Access Points. They all taught at a center site serving students with significant cognitive and behavioral challenges and all had multiple grade levels in their self-contained classes. All students at the center site school have disabilities. The teachers who participated in the research study had previous experience in a traditional school setting. One teacher had experience at a traditional school setting which departmentalized instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Another teacher had prior experience teaching juveniles in a juvenile detention center setting. One teacher worked as a resource teacher in Puerto Rico prior to teaching at the current work location.

Data Analysis

The research study was focused on learning directly from the participating teachers of students with significant learning needs on Access Points, about their experiences participating in the collaborative lesson planning system with targeted professional development. The data collection tool that was utilized was a 25-question interview protocol divided over three interview sessions. Questions one through eight

were asked during round one of the interviews and were geared towards addressing research question one. Questions nine through 17 were discussed during round two of the interviews and addressed research question two. Questions 18 through 25 were asked during round three of the interviews and were aligned to answer research question three. Written consent was obtained from each participant before conducting any interviews. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with participants. The researcher followed the interview protocol and read the interview questions to participants. The interviews were recorded, and the data were transcribed. Once the data were transcribed, a transcript of the interviews was provided to each participant for review and correction, prior to beginning the data analysis process. The analysis for each of the three research questions follows.

Sequential Analysis Steps

Transcripts from participants were read to become aware of the contents of the interviews.

1. The researcher then reviewed the transcript for P1 from round one of the interviews. Sentences, phrases, and paragraphs that related to research question one were highlighted and color coded.

2. The highlighted data were reviewed again to determine patterns that related to research question one.

3. All unrelated data were left unhighlighted and would be available for later review.

4. This process was completed for participant one. The researcher coded and organized the data for the first participant and the data for all subsequent participants

were analyzed and compared to the previous data. For the remainder of the analysis process, the researcher reviewed and analyzed each participant's data and compared and contrasted it to what had been previously analyzed in the study. The constant comparison analysis emerged through this process.

5. Throughout the process, data which related to a specific pattern were identified and placed with the corresponding pattern and supported with direct quotes from the participant that clarified and/or explained the pattern.

6. As patterns expounded and were studied, the researcher noted any overarching themes which emerged through the process. All related patterns and themes were clustered.

7. Patterns and themes were closely observed to see if there were any changes throughout the analysis process.

8. At the conclusion of the analysis of all data, themes were arranged to align with supporting patterns, and the patterns brought clarity to the identified themes.

9. The researcher then wrote an analysis chronicling the scope and the identified themes.

Presentation of Results

The researcher analyzed collected data by research question using the constant comparison method previously outlined. The analysis below is delineated by research question, with patterns supported by direct quotes from participants. Once all patterns were clearly developed, the researcher was able to present the themes for each research question which serves to answer the corresponding research question.

Research Question 1

What are the experiences of individually planning detailed lessons for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenge prior to implementing PLC lesson planning sessions? This research question was addressed by interview questions one through eight during round one of the interviews. Four primary patterns emerged: (a) effective planning takes time, (b) writing multiple lesson plans individually is too much for one teacher, (c) planning in isolation is less effective, (d) the needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities are great.

Two primary themes emerged in answer to research question one as follows: (a) effective lesson planning takes time for this population is overwhelming and requires extensive time and effort and (b) planning lessons individually led to variable lesson effectiveness.

P1 Analysis

Pattern 1. Effective planning takes time. This pattern referred to the reported belief that lesson planning for multiple subjects for significantly cognitively disabled students takes a lot of time. P1 stated that completing the lesson plans took up a great deal of time. P1 stated that lesson planning takes up "a great deal of time in terms of research doing all four subjects." P1 further stated that "the planning time it's just not enough in terms of writing all four lesson plans." P1 expounded that one content area may have about three different parts and maybe four subparts, and that

> writing the lesson plan alongside doing the necessary gathering of materials to be used for our special population, that takes a lot of time if you intend to really do a good job in terms of meeting their unique needs in terms of where they stand mentally and even physically (P1).

P1 also added that "just gathering the materials alone takes a lot of time resources." P1 concluded by sharing that in terms of rigor, lesson planning is demanding and requires many teachers to remain at school until 6 o'clock in the evenings. In addition, the job of teaching and instructing often extends beyond the classroom into one's home.

Pattern 2. Writing multiple lesson plans individually is too much for one teacher. This pattern referred to the reported belief that lesson planning for multiple subjects for significantly cognitively disabled students is overwhelming and requires time and effort beyond what is allotted for the job. "I personally think it is too much. It's too much load, based on the fact that apart from lesson planning which takes up a great deal of time in terms of research doing all four subjects" (P1). It was evident that since lesson planning is only one of the duties of a teacher, planning multiple lessons individually for students with significant cognitive disabilities was too much for one teacher. P1 added that lesson plans are required for the four main core subjects and "that's a lot of work alongside the other main duties. So, sharing the work is always the best." P1 added that "the burden is just too much,"

Pattern 3. Planning in isolation results in variable levels of effectiveness with lesson plans. P1 indicated that planning individually as opposed to collaboratively lead to a mix of some effective and some less effective lessons. P1 stated that "writing lesson plans is time consuming" and that this is the only problem he has in terms of teaching. He stated that he hates lesson plans and concluded that "if somebody was writing the lesson plans for me that would be great" (P1). P1 posited that he is comfortable with teaching and instructing; however, the only obstacle he faces is writing lesson plans.

Pattern 4. The needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities are

great. According to P1 "the needs are great and unique for our population." Lesson planning not only includes writing the steps, but also "searching for relevant material or actually creating those materials for them to be able to really access that education" (P1). P1 added that "you have to basically create, outside of printing paper that you might cut and paste, you still might need to create other work for them to match and so on and manipulate."

P2 Analysis

Pattern 1. Effective planning take time. Planning lesson by myself is "very overwhelming because doing one subject is pretty hard but having to do six subjects you have to have six times the work to do" (P2).

Pattern 2. Writing multiple lesson plans individually is too much for one teacher. When planning lessons independently to meet district and school expectations "the pressure is really on. It makes it feel like a lot of pressure to follow the Access Points and the Standard. I think it is a great amount of pressure by yourself. A lot of stress" (P2).

Pattern 3. Planning in isolation results in variable levels of effectiveness with lesson plans. P1 stated that you "can't do a good job on every lesson," "you could do a good job on one subject, and then feel like you're falling down in another subject." When planning by yourself, you just have your own resources and "it's all on me" and if the lesson fails "then you can only blame yourself" (P2). You would have to rely on classroom support staff to give you feedback on the effectiveness of the lesson. This results in you relying on the textbook and not worrying so much about teaching in

digestible parts. P2 concluded that it would be "less effective because I would be trying to keep it short and keep it simple as I could."

Pattern 4. The needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities are great. The significant needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities doesn't change (P2). P2 stated that in order to determine student learning you would need to use all the devices we have for testing to find some indication of growth.

P3 Analysis

Pattern 1. Effective planning take time. The time constraint when planning lessons by yourself for students with severe cognitive disabilities is "just too much" (P3). P3 added that "one or two subjects is not that challenging, but when it is more than two, it becomes a little bit too much to handle."

Pattern 2. Writing multiple lesson plans individually is too much for one teacher. When writing lesson plans by yourself P3 stated that it "feels a little bit overwhelming because I have to make sure that I am including everything that is required by the district." According to P3, "I feel like wow, you know, I really have to put my all to meet the demands of the district."

Pattern 3. Planning in isolation results in variable levels of effectiveness with lesson plans. In terms of effectiveness, P3 stated "I prefer to work with someone else because that someone else might be able to provide something else that I am not providing for the students." P3 added, "I think that working together, we could provide more for that lesson plan." When working independently P3 expressed feeling "like there might be missing pieces that I haven't provided on the lesson plan." Therefore, "independently for me, it would be more challenging." "To have a quality lesson plan, it

will be beneficial for two people to collaborate on the lesson plan. We will have a more cohesive lesson plan" (P3). According to P3, this will result in "a better success rate for the student."

Pattern 4. The needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities are great. When doing lesson plans, P3 posited that "you have to take into consideration the subject matter, because the children do very in cognitive situations. So, when you are planning, you have to make sure you are planning the lesson based on what the child is capable of doing." According to P3, the math Access Points are "very abstract for our students, so you have to be able to plan the math lessons on a level that the students are going to understand." In addition, "you have to include a lot of tactile activities" and "provide the students with a lot of visuals" (P3).

P4 Analysis

Pattern 3. Planning in isolation results in variable levels of effectiveness with lesson plans. According to P4, planning lessons independently gives "a little bit more control over the quality." P4 believes that when planning independently, teachers have a little bit more leeway in finding different strategies, omitting something from the lesson, or adding something. P4 stated that he feels that planning lessons independently results in him being effective. According to P4 this is measured by whether or not the lesson reflects the "needs of the child and the content on what the child or my kids are going to learn, I think I would have actually planned and delivered an effective lesson." P4 adds that an effective teacher would know if his or lesson has been delivered effectively. P4 posited that "if it's resonating with a child, you know if the learning has taken place." Further, "if learning has taken place there will be a change in kids' behavior. They will

answer correctly." Finally, P4 concludes that "planning my lesson independently actually helps me to meet district and school expectations."

Pattern 4. The needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities are great. According to P4, the needs of the children are very important when it comes to planning lessons.

> Planning lessons for students who have severe cognitive disabilities in and of itself is a challenge because every child varies, every child learns differently, every child comes in the classroom setting with different forms of disability, so it is incumbent on that teacher to effectively plan a lesson that fits the need of all the children and takes into consideration their physical, takes into consideration the whole child (P4)

P4 posited that it is necessary to survey the class to get to know the children you are teaching. You would need to understand "what are their academic, social, physical, and personal, and emotional needs and take all of that into consideration when I'm planning my lesson" (P4). It is therefore necessary for the teacher to "make sure that there is differentiation, and variation, and see how my lesson fits into the overall scheme of things in terms of content, in terms of delivery, in terms of strategy, in terms of differentiation, in terms of grouping, and so on" (P4). In conclusion, P4 stated that "the student needs take president over everything else."

P5 Analysis

Pattern 1. Effective planning take time. P5 stated that when planning lessons independently "we don't have too much time and I have to work in my house." P5 added that work must be completed at home and there isn't any time for that. During the

workday, there is only one hour for planning, and the remainder of the lesson planning must be done at home. P5 stated "I don't agree with that, to work in my home."

Pattern 3. Planning in isolation results in variable levels of effectiveness with lesson plans. According to P5 "it's better work with other teachers." P5 posited that working in a "PLC meeting it is better than by myself." P5 stated that:

> I don't feel good because we, when I work by myself I feel the lesson plan is no good because I have to think about seven class and when I work only with one class, I feel better because I think I do good work with my lesson plans

According to P5, planning independently is not good for allowing teachers to build in high impact instructional strategies. P5 posited that "I don't think it is a very good idea to work by myself with the lesson plan." Further, "that is a bad impact for everything, especially with my students when I work by myself with the lesson plan. That is not good." P5 claimed that working independently on lesson planning results in the principal providing feedback that the lesson plan does not meet district and school expectations. In addition, the lesson is not good, and the quality is not good when planning independently with all the lesson plans. P5 concluded that it is better to work with other teachers.

Pattern 4. The needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities are great. P5 indicated that "when I am planning, I need to take care of the individual differences of my students, and then my students are low." However, when planning independently P5 found that "I don't have time to think about the different individual ability of the student, whether they are low or high or what. I don't have time for that. I need to make for the students the same lesson plan." P5 concluded "that is not good."

P6 Analysis

Pattern 3. Planning in isolation results in variable levels of effectiveness with lesson plans. P6 stated that when doing lessons independently "there were times, especially in the beginning when I first started out when it was more intimidating because I had no idea what the lesson plan should look like." P6 further indicated that "at first it was very intimidating, and kind of nerve racking." P6 also shared that when developing plans independently it was difficult to connect courses across curriculum, for example, there was no way to connect social studies to English to math. According to P6 "there are vocabulary terms that will overlap through different subjects. So that is one thing I would say I didn't feel comfortable with or confident in student learning."

Pattern 4. The needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities are great. P6 posited that when developing lesson plans independently, "the only thing that would get in the way was the behaviors. Even though I got to know the students and everything, because the students were still only coming to see me once a day, and it was a new environment." P6 further explained that students on the autism spectrum have issues with transitioning which caused them to require more help with behavior management and transitioning from class to class.

Themes for Research Question 1

Theme 1. Effective lesson planning takes time, can be overwhelming, and requires extensive time and effort. During round one of the interviews, which was geared toward answering research question one, five of six participants shared that they felt the job of individually planning detailed lessons for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenges was overwhelming, a challenge, and too much to be done in

the limited time allotted for lesson planning at school. One participant shared feeling comfortable doing lesson plans individually because it was easier. Participant one (P1) shared that the experience of individually planning detailed lessons for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenge was too much and that it often extends beyond the classroom to home environment.

According to P2, planning lessons by yourself for students with severe cognitive disabilities is very overwhelming because "doing one subject is pretty hard, but having to do six subjects, you have six times the work to do." This means that you cannot do a good job on every lesson or every subject. P3 is of the opinion that when doing two or more lesson plans it "becomes a little bit too much to handle." According to P3, more could be accomplished, including a better-quality lesson plan if teachers were not responsible for doing six different lesson plans. P3 stated that "it is just too much."

P1 stated that the needs of the population are great and unique. It's a tremendous job; an almost impossible job, and that the burden is too much, as it sometimes results in teachers remaining at school until 6 o'clock in the evenings trying to write lesson plans and create materials to support instruction. P1 concluded that one classroom teacher doing all the subjects is impossible and supports collaboration and sharing the work. P3 stated that the children vary in cognitive ability and teachers must plan lessons based on what the child is capable of doing. According to P5, it is better to work with other teachers since teachers do not have much time to complete multiple lesson plans and will have to work on lesson plans from their home, which is a less than ideal scenario. P5 shared that when developing lesson plans for multiple subjects independently, there is limited "time to think about the different individual ability of the student." P5 reported

this leads to teachers using the same lesson plan for all students which is not good.

Theme 2. Planning lessons individually led to variable lesson effectiveness.

During round one of interviews, P1 discussed the importance of having high expectations for students and in this area P1 is "very comfortable planning and disbursing the knowledge." While responding to sub-question six, P1 shared that using formative assessments is one way to assess student learning. This, along with observation and questioning provides data on whether students are learning the content, and P1 was comfortable in this area. P1 was also comfortable with lesson delivery and was able to change the mode of delivery if there were indications that students may not be understanding the content or were unable to demonstrate their understanding the way indicated in the lesson plan. P1 concluded that there is a level of comfort and reported feeling effective at successfully delivering a quality lesson to students. The only exception identified is writing the lesson plan. P1 explained that "writing the lesson plans is time consuming" and that "if somebody were writing the lesson plans for me that would be great." P2 shared that when planning for multiple subjects independently, "you could do a good job with one subject, and then feel like you are falling down in another subject." P2 concluded that when asked to plan and deliver lessons independently, the lesson quality would be less effective as teachers would be trying to keep the lesson plans short and simple. According to P2, the pressure would really be on that one teacher to follow the Access Points and the standard; this would be a "great amount of pressure by yourself: a lot of stress." In response to sub-question six, P3 stated that working collaboratively will result in a better success rate for the students as opposed to working independently. According to P3, when completing lesson plans individually, there is a

feeling that you missed something extra that the student needs. There is a feeling of being overwhelmed because the onus is on the individual teacher to ensure everything is included as required by the school and district. When interviewed, P4 shared that planning lessons independently for students who have severe cognitive disabilities is a challenge

> because every child varies, every child learns differently, every child comes into the classroom setting with different forms of disabilities, so it is incumbent on that teacher to effectively plan a lesson that fits the need of all the children.

P4 shared that if the lesson meets the individual needs of the students, then that lesson, and therefore that teacher is effective. During the interview, P5 was of the view that planning independently has a negative impact on the ability to build in high impact instructional strategies. It also negatively impacted the quality of the lesson plan and student learning. P6 felt confident and more comfortable doing lesson plans independently, because "it was just easier." P6 reported that planning independently gave the teacher more control and made the teacher feel more effective as the instructional expert; however, P6 was of the view that there is not "going to be a one size fits all. Doing it individually versus collaboration; I think there has to be a little bit of both in order for it to be successful."

Research Question 2

What was the experience of learning to plan lessons for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenges together in a PLC? This research question was addressed by interview questions nine through 17 during round two of the interviews. Four primary patterns emerged: (a) teachers feel empowered and more confident when

they plan together, (b) collaborative planning results in improved pedagogy, (c) collaborative planning increases student learning, (d) planning time must be protected.

P1 Analysis

Pattern 1. Teachers feel empowered and more confident when they plan together. While working with other teachers to jointly plan lessons P1 reported feeling empowered. According to P1, meeting with other teachers to collaboratively plan lessons "is a great benefit" and the result "is a win-win when teachers can come together and share ideas." P1 found that is it "good to know what is happening in other classrooms to even guide your practice."

Pattern 2. Collaborative planning results in improved pedagogy. P1 posited that "planning collaboratively enhances your teaching." According to P1 "I am constantly learning from even new people coming into SMA or into our situation with our special population." P1 found that as a result of collaboratively planning lessons "I know what my other colleagues are doing" and "I can up my game by looking at what they are doing."

Pattern 3. Collaborative planning results in increased student learning. P1 stated that planning lessons collaboratively "is a positive and is a great benefit." P1 further stated that students are better off" when teachers know what other teachers are doing in their classrooms. According to P1, "students are improving, they are happy" and there has been "a lot of progress in terms of my kids learning."

Pattern 4. Planning time must be protected. According to P1, a problem still exists in terms of time. P1 stated that when working with other teachers to jointly plan lessons, teachers need to "concentrate more on planning the lessons." P1 found that

teachers tend to "get off on other situations instead of really honing in on real lesson planning and collaborating." In addition, P1 posited that during collaborative lesson planning time, there is a tendency to "jump from talking about different things. About meeting this and meeting that, and we are not really doing lesson plans in the time we have." P1 recommended that lesson planning time should be dedicated to lesson planning where teachers have the opportunity to really sit down and write the lesson plan.

P2 Analysis

Pattern 1. Teachers feel empowered and more confident when they plan together. According to P2, working with peers to develop lesson plans feels good and produces good results. P2 stated that planning collaboratively is very helpful especially if there is a standard that is confusing, having other people in room can help clarify the intent of the standard and what should be done in the lesson plans.

Pattern 2. Collaborative planning results in improved pedagogy. P2 expressed a preference for having other teachers to plan with. According to P2, working with other teachers to jointly plan lessons give teachers someone to bound ideas off; teachers can "share experiences" and it is "nice to work with other people" (P2). This results in teachers learning new ways to work together. P2 stated that "sometimes it's good when you are working together, and the light shines, and then you go ah ha and then you know what's going on."

Pattern 3. Collaborative planning increased student learning. According to P2, when planning collaboratively there are "more successes in different subjects." P2 posited that "students are learning" and attributes this to things being "better because everything is not all on one person." P2 concluded that "students can get more out of it

than when you are by yourself, because you have other people's ideas on how to proceed."

Pattern 4. Planning time must be protected. While P2 really likes planning lessons collaboratively, P2 doesn't "feel like there is enough time in the day to really do that." P2 reported feeling that "we end up rushing, we end up like more or less just giving each other assignments. It is very rare that there is enough time to collaborate." P2 stated that "when there is not enough time, when everybody is just looking at the clock waiting for 3:15 to come because then they can leave, that makes me nervous."

P3 Analysis

Pattern 1. Teachers feel empowered and more confident when they plan together. P3 stated that "planning with other teachers has been a great experience" and reported feel very comfortable and confident when working with other teachers. According to P3 "I feel more confident that I could succeed with the lesson plans and meet the district's expectations." and "I have my resources where I'm getting more help so that I could have better activities for the student." P3 concluded that it is a good thing, and that "we are all in it together."

Pattern 2. Collaborative planning results in improved pedagogy. P3 reported feeling like "I am getting a lot out of it" when working together to develop lesson plans. P3 further reported feeling like "I am going to learn something out of it." P3 clarified that "working collaboratively, planning collaboratively is going to better our teaching, better our instruction because we are learning from each other." According to P3,

> we are working as a team, and we are learning as a team, we are implementing new strategies with the students and we are all doing it together, collaboratively,

> so I feel it's a learning process for all the teachers that are doing this. I feel very positive about planning collaboratively. I feel like I am learning from everyone and vice versa. It's a group commitment, and it helps us as well as the students. We are all in it together.

In conclusion, P3 stated that self-efficacy is positively affected as a result of "working with teachers that are very experienced, very capable of teaching, and working to the best of their ability."

Pattern 3. Collaborative planning increased student learning. P3 found that when planning lessons with peers, the resulting lesson plans are exactly aligned with the students' level and that teachers have room to modify it. P3 stated "we could bring it up or we could bring it down depending on the cognition of the student. According to P3, all students at the school learn differently and through different channels, but the lesson plans developed with peers are geared towards the cognition of the different students so "the children have the best lesson plans, and the best education" (P3).

Pattern 4. Planning time must be protected. Although the lesson plans developed with peers are well written and planned, P3 stated that

> I feel we can have a little bit more time so that we have all our T's crossed and our I's dotted. A little bit more time to have a quality lesson plan. I feel that we should have a little bit more time to collaborate more. The time goes so fast when we have our PLC because sometimes, not only do we have our PLC, we have other trainings in between, like the Marzano, the Kagan strategies that we had the other day, focus calendar that we have to review sometimes, the scale. So, I really feel that I would like to have a little bit more time during the PLC so we could

cover more things. Especially the lesson plans. I feel that it goes very fast, especially when we have other things embedded in the meeting.

P4 Analysis

Pattern 1. Teachers feel empowered and more confident when they plan together. P4 reported feeling very confident sitting together and collaboratively planning a lesson with other teachers to jointly plan lessons. In addition, P4 reported liking the fact that teachers can sit together to collaborate as a team to "put together strategies, and classroom management strategies to effectively meet the needs of our children." According to P4, the "the collaboration part is more exciting" and "gives the teacher a little bit more confidence to meet district and school expectations."

Pattern 2. Collaborative planning results in improved pedagogy. P4 found that working in a collaborative setting in regard to lesson planning is an "effective way to glean, to gather information from other teachers, to see how they plan a lesson and how it works for them." P4 stated while "it may not work for me, I can use that as a backdrop to change, to modify that particular content or subject matter to meet the needs of my kid, and effectively deliver my lesson." According to P4, it is always important for teachers to "collaborate on how to effectively meet the needs of our children" and while you don't always have the answer for everything, you may reach out to peers and ask for help. The result is that teachers are "more effective on a joint level to put together a lesson plan" and "there is more effectiveness in terms of delivery." In conclusion, P4 stated that "planning lessons as a team gives teachers the ability to learn from each other, share their thoughts, share their views, and at the same time take into consideration the needs, the wants of a child."

Pattern 3. Collaborative planning increased student learning. According to P4, developing lessons collaboratively enriches student learning. P4 stated that students "open up more when they see variety instead of one set of stale, scripted set of teaching strategies" resulting in improved student learning. P4 posited that the bottom line is that we come together as a team to figure out how to deliver an effective lesson to meet the needs of our children and their learning is more enriched with "the input from the collaborative lesson planning."

P5 Analysis

Pattern 1. Teachers feel empowered and more confident when they plan together. P5 reported feeling very good when working together collaboratively to develop lesson plans. According to P5, there is more confidence that the resulting lesson plan is "good for my students" and "more effective." The level of confidence is improved because P5 is better able to focus on tailoring lesson plans to target students while peers can work on lessons geared towards different students, all while working together on the lesson plan.

Pattern 2. Collaborative planning results in improved pedagogy. According to P5 "I share ideas and the other teacher who collaborates with me shares ideas, too." As a result, P5 stated that "I feel good because I learn from another teacher" and sometimes the other teacher "learns from me."

Pattern 3. Collaborative planning increased student learning. P5 postulated that "student learning is getting better" because teachers work together to plan lessons. According to P5, "everybody knows the Access Points for each class and then we collaborate for our student to learn more this year than other years."

P6 Analysis

Pattern 1. Teachers feel empowered and more confident when they plan together. P6 reported feeling confident and comfortable learning new ways to work together to develop lesson plans. P6 stated "I felt confident in the environment when we collaborate just because listening to the other teachers talk, I could tell that they had experience." In addition, P6 found that the other teachers in the collaborative group "knew what they were doing, and that they had done it for years." This enabled P6 to "feel more comfortable and more confident from collaborating." P6 reported being

> more confident, more of an expert with lesson plans, because I feel like I got the chance to collaborate with more experience, a lot more experienced teachers, and not just teachers, but administration, and other staff that just have a lot more experience, and giving me information, and teaching me new strategies. I feel like it has been very, very helpful and been even more effective.

According to P6 "it is just helpful to be around more experienced people." In addition, "being connected with other teachers that have more experience, just makes it a lot less intimidating when navigating or creating a highly effective lesson plan."

Pattern 2. Collaborative planning results in improved pedagogy. P6 found that when planning lessons collaboratively "you get different ideas of you know, strategies from one another. It definitely helps a lot."

Pattern 3. Collaborative planning increased student learning. According to P6, planning with others allows you to improve the quality of the lesson plan because you know more about each other's classes and students. In addition, during collaborative lesson planning "you can get very specific about each one of the students and their

needs." P6 concluded that planning lesson with peers makes the lesson plan more effective as students are more engaged in the lessons and are more successful. P6 stated that "you can definitely see it through their assessment scores, from their pre-test to their post-test you can see increases."

Themes for Research Question 2

Theme 1. Collaborative planning results in increased teacher confidence. Round two of the interviews was geared towards answering research question 2. All research participants reported feeling more empowered or confident as a result of participating in collaborative lesson planning and PLC meetings. P1 stated "I feel empowered when I meet with other teachers." P2 reported feeling good and that the lesson plans "come out really good sometimes," and that the "collaboration process helps with that." P3 shared that "planning with other teachers has been a great experience," and that she feels "very confident" and that it is "a good thing." P4 reported feeling "very confident sitting together and collaboratively planning a lesson." Both P5 and P6 reported feeling comfortable collaborating in the PLC group. P5 stated that planning with others makes her feel more effective, while P6 reported feeling confident and comfortable learning new ways of planning. According to P6,

> I feel even more confident, more of an expert with lesson plans, because I feel like I got the chance to collaborate with more experienced, a lot more experienced teachers, and not just teachers, but administration, and other staff that just have a lot more experience and giving me information and teaching me new strategies.

Theme 2. Teachers need protected planning time to develop quality lesson plans. Three of the six participants interviewed agreed that there was a need to protect

planning time for teachers. According to P1, when meeting for collaborative lesson planning, teachers often get sidetracked and "get off on other situations instead of really honing in on real lesson planning and collaborating." P1 further stated that during weekly collaborative lesson planning meetings, teachers engage more in "talking about planning" instead of really sitting down to develop lesson plans. P1 concluded that the "planning time we have is not even adequate," and that "time is the problem." The views of P2 align with this position. P2 reported feeling like there is not "enough time in the day" to really plan lessons. P2 found that teachers "end up rushing" and "end up like more of less just giving each other assignments." P2 concluded that "it is very rare that there is enough time to collaborate." P3 added that a little bit more time is needed to ensure that teachers "have all our t's crossed and our i's dotted." P3 posited that during collaborative lesson planning and PLC meetings time "goes very fast, especially when we have other things embedded in the meeting." According to P3, with a little bit more time to collaborate, teachers would be able to develop quality lesson plans. P3 shared that "time goes so fast when we have our PLC because sometimes, not only do we have our PLC, we have other trainings in between, like the Marzano, and the Kagan strategies." In addition to these trainings, P3 reported that teachers spend time during collaborative lesson planning meetings reviewing the focus calendar and the learning scale. P3 concluded that with a bit more time for collaboration and lesson planning, teachers "could cover more things, especially the lesson plans."

Research Question 3

What was the experience of planning lessons for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenges together in a PLC after learning and practicing the way of

work? This research question was addressed by interview questions 18 through 25 during round two of the interviews. Four primary patterns emerged: (a) teachers learn from colleagues during collaborative planning, (b) students achieve more behaviorally and academically as a result of teachers planning collaboratively, (c) planning collaboratively helps teachers meet school and district requirements for lesson planning, and (d) even with collaborative planning, time remains a concern/constraint.

P1 Analysis

Pattern 1. Teachers learn from colleagues during collaborative planning. P1 shared that planning lessons with peers resulted in knowledge being shared among colleagues. P1 reported feeling good about the teams and the leadership at the school and in the department because P1 thinks they are doing the "the right thing as far as students are concerned and the outcomes we want from students." According to P1, "you've got to be very effective after coming back from planning." Planning sessions results in "tremendous growth in terms of teachers themselves." P1 further stated that each teacher brings a set of information and knowledge garnered over the years to the table, and they come "prepared to give, and also come prepared to learn from my colleagues." P1 found that PLCs and collaborative planning sessions impart a kind of confidence towards other teachers, and teachers benefit from hearing what other teachers are doing in their classrooms and how they are handling problems with students. This improves community spirit and empowers teachers to share and use strategies that other teachers shared as having been successful in impacting student learning. P1 concluded he may be learning even more from planning with others than he is giving. Finally, planning lessons collaboratively is a huge thing and going forward that is the model that should be

practiced.

Pattern 2. Students achieve more behaviorally and academically as a result of teachers planning collaboratively. According to P1, engaging in collaborative lesson planning has had a positive impact on the quality of the lesson plans which has resulted in improved student achievement. P1 stated that "the growth of my students in terms of maturity is really commendable and their learning in terms of the strategies that I get out of planning with the teachers is really showing itself to be a positive thing." P1 found that students have learned, they have matured, and they have responded well to questions from the lesson. There has been tremendous growth in terms of student achievement. P1 posited that 75% of students within the last school year have improved with behaviors and academic achievement. Students are "behaving at reasonably decent levels in order to go forward with learning."

Pattern 3. Planning collaboratively helps teachers meet school and district requirements for lesson planning. When probed, P1 concluded that collaborative lesson planning with the professional development embedded "definitely" makes teachers feel more able to meet district and school requirements for lesson planning.

Pattern 4. Even with collaborative planning, time remains a concern/constraint. According to P1, time continues to be a constraint "in terms of doing the necessary research and getting the appropriate materials for whatever subject." P1 posited that because the needs of the students are so great, there are limited resources that address the many needs of our students. P1 found that it is difficult to locate instructional materials for students with significant cognitive disabilities, so teachers often must spend time doing work at home that they are not paid for. P1 concluded that

one major concern continues to be time constraints.

P2 Analysis

Pattern 1. Teachers learn from colleagues during collaborative planning. P2 thinks that "lesson plans are always better when there is some collaboration." According to P2, teacher "effectiveness is better because somebody else thought about it and did it, but if I did a lesson that was really very high it just makes me stop and try to chunk so it's more like it gives me kind of a blueprint, and then I have to fix it. So that's better than doing it by myself."

Pattern 2. Students achieve more behaviorally and academically as a result of teachers planning collaboratively. According to P2, "student learning is better because they are getting their quality of instruction, so their learning should reflect that." P2 stated that she wants the students "to succeed, but in reality, sometimes they do, and the lesson goes over well, and sometimes they don't." P2 stated that when this happens, she attacks it another way. P2 posited that planning lessons with peers makes her feel better than if she only has herself to blame for a lesson failure.

Pattern 3. Planning collaboratively helps teachers meet school and district requirements for lesson planning. P2 stated that the "lesson quality is better" as a result of planning with peers. According to P2, it is better because as a result of collaboratively planning lessons, teachers only have to concentrate on one subject area. P2 concluded that planning with peers makes it "much simpler to meet expectations because you really only have to worry about one subject."

Pattern 4. Even with collaborative planning, time remains a concern/constraint. Although teachers only have to prepare lesson plans for one subject

when planning collaboratively, P2 found that "it is very difficult to get anything really done in 45 minutes." P2 thinks "that the collaborative lesson planning should be like a time that is a little longer." According to P2, the collaborative lesson planning time feels "like a big rush." P2 suggested that having more time to brainstorm at the beginning and having time to go "step by step for every subject" may be beneficial to teachers. Another suggestion from P2 is to focus on one subject per common planning time and then allow everyone to be responsible for what they need to accomplish that week. P2 concluded that if everyone could work on one subject per common planning time, then everyone would benefit.

P3 Analysis

Pattern 1. Teachers learn from colleagues during collaborative planning. P3 reported feeling

> like I am getting something out of collaborating with other teachers. I also feel confident that I can write a better quality lesson plan collaborating with other teachers, because all of us, we have a lot of doubts about certain things, but when we are together with other colleagues, we feel we are doing a better job, and we are doing it successfully.

P1 stated that she feels her lesson plans are "going to be more meaningful," and more "adaptable to the students" as a result of her participation in the PLC meetings and based on the fact that she is learning from her colleagues and her mentor. According to P3,

> I feel my effectiveness has increased a lot because in the beginning of the school year, I felt like I was confused, I didn't know what was going on, but because when we go to the PLC, it's not only doing the lesson plans, but we are having

other trainings that we are learning about, I feel very confident that I can plan better because I get so much feedback when I participate in the PLC.

P3 shared that "every time I go to my PLC, I am going to leave learning something that is going to help me better serve the students." According to P3, working together to collaboratively plan lessons helped her gain new skills and knowledge about educational trends. P3 concluded that she thinks it is beneficial to continue the PLCs as "they are good for teachers." We learn a lot, we are "learning from each other; we are collaborating." Further, "I know that when I go to the PLC, I am going to learn something from someone. Something that I can take back to my class, and also to help me write an effective lesson plan."

Pattern 2. Students achieve more behaviorally and academically as a result of teachers planning collaboratively. According to P3, planning lessons with peers increases student learning and helps students to increase their knowledge. P3 found that all of the knowledge teachers get from the PLC are being implemented in the classrooms with students as teachers are trying new strategies with students. As a result of participating in planning with peers and PLC meetings, P3 posited that the quality of lesson plans is much clearer and better. Lesson plans are filled with the things shared during PLC meetings and teachers are better able to adapt the delivery of the lessons to meet the cognitive needs of the students, thus making learning more real for them. As a result, learning is better for students.

Pattern 3. Planning collaboratively helps teachers meet school and district requirements for lesson planning. According to P3, "in the beginning I felt like my lesson plans needed more, something is missing, but with all the training, and all the

ideas that we share collaboratively my lesson plans, in my opinion, are making more sense." In addition, participating in collaborative lesson planning and PLC meetings enables teachers to write a better quality and more effective lesson plan. This allows teachers to meet school and district expectations for a quality lesson plan. P3 concluded that lesson delivery is "better because the quality of the lesson plan is so much better." The lesson plans produced after participating in collaborative lesson planning and PLC meetings includes many "different strategies for students" and are more "adaptable for our students."

P4 Analysis

Pattern 1. Teachers learn from colleagues during collaborative planning. P4 posited that

> planning with other teachers, planning lesson for our children who have severe cognitive disabilities, in my view is an effective way to meet the needs of our children in the classroom because each teacher comes to that meeting, that collaboration, with their own set of ideas and tools, and as a teacher you want to put everything together, and you take whatever fits the needs of your children.

P4 concluded that working with other teachers to collaboratively plan lessons is an "effective way of moving forward."

Pattern 2. Students achieve more behaviorally and academically as a result of teachers planning collaboratively. P4 stated that "students learn well when they are presented with different ideas and different variety." According to P4, using "a variety of teaching strategies instead of sticking to … talk and chalk all the time" results in improved learning for children as "they respond better when that has occurred."

Pattern 3. Planning collaboratively helps teachers meet school and district requirements for lesson planning. P4 suggested that "every school and every district should encourage a collaborative effort in terms of planning lessons and put together strategies and tools to meet the needs of our children." According to P4, being in a collaborative environment planning lessons enables teachers to "exceed school and district expectations when it comes to lesson planning."

P5 Analysis

Pattern 1. Teachers learn from colleagues during collaborative planning. P5 found that working with other teachers to collaboratively plan lessons results in a good lesson plan as teachers share in PLC meetings and they each learn from each other. According to P5, teachers receive different training during PLC meetings and if she is not proficient with one program or platform and another peer is more proficient, they can "share in the PLC what we know" about the strategy or platform so that they can all include it in their lesson and implement it in their classrooms.

Pattern 2. Students achieve more behaviorally and academically as a result of teachers planning collaboratively. P5 posited that planning lessons with peers resulted in students learning more during the year and students improving overall. According to P5, working collaboratively results in a better-quality lesson plan, which translates to a more engaging lesson in the classroom. There are more activities and more and varied strategies included in the different lesson plans and the students benefit.

Pattern 3. Planning collaboratively helps teachers meet school and district requirements for lesson planning. P5 believes that the process of working with other teachers to collaboratively plan lessons better enables teachers to meet district and school

expectations for preparing lessons. When probed, P5 stated that she agrees with the statement.

Pattern 4. Even with collaborative planning, time remains a concern/constraint. According to P5, teachers do not have enough time to work on their lesson plan at school to make it a quality lesson plan. P5 shared that although she tried to do her best work, there isn't enough time. P5 concluded, "I need to have more time to work on my lesson plans to make good quality lesson plans."

P6 Analysis

Pattern 1. Teachers learn from colleagues during collaborative planning. P6 reported feeling good about planning with others and being able to incorporate high impact instructional strategies in lessons plans. P6 shared feeling confident from "being surrounded by other people that are experienced, that have many years of doing it, and that have been through so much trainings and schooling, and different workshops." P6 feels that "they bring a lot of knowledge and experience to the meetings, and that helps a lot, and that makes me more comfortable."

P6 posited that

> it feels good to be able to meet up with our peers because we don't often get the chance to talk to them to see how things are going in terms of lessons and our students, and how we are dealing with implementing the lesson plans in classrooms.

P6 added that it feels good to be able to meet and talk to peers about different things related to lesson plans as this lets the teachers know if the lesson plans are being implemented successfully or if there are things that need to be changed. P6 reported

feeling like she has "really grown this year" as a result of planning with peers. In addition, she has gone from "not feeling confident whatsoever, to becoming a lot more effective and a lot more comfortable with developing lesson plans. In addition, during collaborative lesson planning and PLC meetings teachers are "always learning new strategies" as these meetings are "focused on learning new strategies." This empowers teachers to come up with new ideas of what we can do. In conclusion, P6 stated that

> I feel like when I come away from the meetings like I feel like I'm coming away from a meeting with experts. Not just necessarily the instructors, but like admin and stuff, just everybody that's there brings so much to the table in terms of lesson planning design and just implementing them.

Pattern 2. Students achieve more behaviorally and academically as a result of teachers planning collaboratively. P6 reported feeling "like student learning has improved." P6 shared that there are things that "I definitely need to work on in making sure I reach all levels with my students, but I feel like just being in these meetings, learning new strategies, and talking with teachers about their students and seeing what they are doing to implement the lesson plans" helps to improve student learning.

Pattern 3. Planning collaboratively helps teachers meet school and district requirements for lesson planning. P6 stated that "the quality of lesson plans have definitely improved from the very beginning to now." As a result of planning collaboratively with others and participating in PLC meetings, P6 concluded that "I feel like we do a very, very, very good job of meeting district and school standards." In addition, P6 reported getting more into the "swing of being able to understand what's needed" for a quality lesson plan and feels that the quality has "definitely improved over

the year."

Pattern 4. Even with collaborative planning, time remains a concern/constraint. P6 expressed feeling concerned about lessons that were not successful and the students that are stagnant and not making progress. P6 reported feeling like there "is just not enough time to get everything done." P6 wishes that there was "more time to learn the different stuff like Boardmaker, or other stuff." In addition, P6 feels that teachers would benefit from having more planning time "to learn about different strategies." P6 concluded that this would help with the non-successes and help all students to make progress.

Themes for Research Question 3

Theme 1. Collaborative lesson planning better equips teachers to meet requirements for lesson planning. All participants agreed that working collaboratively to plan lesson for their students with significant cognitive disabilities better equipped them to meet requirements for lesson planning. P1 is of the view that collaborative lesson planning with the professional development embedded makes one feel more able to meet the requirements for lesson planning. P2 found that when planning with peers the lesson quality is better. P2 attributed this to the fact that when working collaboratively, teachers are concentrating on preparing lessons for one subject area. This differs from when teachers were working on lesson planning individually. P2 reported that "it is much simpler to meet expectations because you really only have to worry about one subject." According to P3, planning with peers helps her "write an effective lesson plan." P3 reported learning how to "write a better-quality lesson plan, a more quality lesson plan, a lesson plan that all the students are going to master" during PLC meetings. P3 also stated

that all the trainings, and all the ideas that are shared during collaborative lesson planning meetings resulted in teachers developing lesson plans that are more aligned with the cognitive level of students. P4 stated that being able to plan with others and engaging in the collaborative lesson planning process increased teachers' capacity to meet requirements for lesson planning. According to P4, teachers incorporate more high impact instructional strategies in their lesson plans which resulted in a better-quality lesson plan that reflects the learning levels of students. P4 is of the opinion that "every school district should encourage a collaborative effort in terms of planning lessons and put together strategies and tools to meet the needs of our children." According to P4, "in a collaborative environment planning lessons we should exceed school and district expectations when it comes to lesson planning." P5 agreed that planning lessons collaboratively enables teachers to meet the district and school expectations for preparing lesson plans. P6 stated that "the quality of lesson plans has definitely improved from the very beginning to now." P6 reported coming away from PLC and collaborative lesson planning meetings feeling very good about being able to meet district and school standards.

Theme 2. Lesson quality impacts student achievement. All participants reported improved student learning as a result of engaging in collaborative lesson planning meetings and working together as a PLC. According to P1 every single student has achieved a great deal behaviorally or academically. P1 found that when students' behavior improves, teachers can move forward with focusing on learning. P1 attributes this improvement in student learning to "the participation in the PLC and the professional development sessions," which enables him to be able to implement more high impact

instructional strategies with his students. P1 stated "the growth of my students in terms of maturity is really commendable and their learning in terms of the strategies that I get outside of planning with the teachers is really showing itself to be a positive thing." P1 reported that he may be learning even more from his peers than he is giving and stated, "it's a good thing." P1 feels "rewarded as far as the student successes are concerned." P1 stated that students "have advanced a great deal. They have also matured. They have learned." P2 concluded that "student learning is better because they are getting their quality of instruction so their learning should reflect that." According to P3, students are increasing their knowledge. P3 attributes this to "all of the information and all of the knowledge that we get from the PLC, we are also implementing it with the students." P3 found that the quality of the lesson plans developed after participating in collaborative lesson planning and PLC meetings with targeted professional development is much better and clearer. P3 further stated that the quality of lesson plans and the delivery of the lesson plans have "become more adaptable and more real for the student." P3 concluded that PLCs are wonderful because teachers are "learning from each other; we are collaborating, and we are making it better for the students." P4 posited that "students learn well when they are presented with different ideas and different variety." According to P4, planning lessons with peers results in a quality lesson plan with a variety of teaching strategies embedded in the lesson plan. These lesson plans reflect the learning level the students and students respond better when this occurs, resulting in improved learning.

Theme 3. Teachers need more planning time to develop quality lesson plans. There was consensus among participants that even with dedicated time for collaborative lesson planning and PLC meetings, teachers still need more protected planning time to

develop quality lesson plans that meet the unique needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities. According to P1, “there is always a time constraint in terms of doing the necessary research and getting the appropriate materials for whatever subject.” P1 attributes this to there not being sufficient ready-made instructional materials appropriate for students with significant cognitive disabilities who are on Access Points. P1 shared that these materials include items such as manipulatives, and lesson activities that allow student to respond by dragging and dropping their responses to make answers. P2 agrees that teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities do not ever have enough time to really collaborate, which results in teachers having to make a lot of their own instructional materials. According to P2, during the dedicated collaborative lesson planning time, teachers feel “rushed.” P2 posited that given more time teachers “could actually do more collaboration.” P2 concluded that “it is very difficult to get anything really done in 45 minutes,” and that “the collaborative lesson planning should be like a time that is a little longer.” P5 found that teachers don’t have too much time to engage in developing lesson plans at school, especially when asked to build high impact instructional strategies into the lesson plans. P5 stated “I need to have more time to work on my lesson plan to make a good quality lesson plan.” According to P6 “there is just not enough time to get everything done” when creating lesson plans for students with significant cognitive disabilities. P6 found that there are lots of different technological resources and strategies that may be incorporated to help improve the lesson plans and successes of students with significant cognitive disabilities, but more time is needed for teachers to learn the different programs. P6 concluded with a wish for “more time to learn about the different strategies” that can help increase student success.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The demands placed on teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities to be subject area experts for multiple subjects and to develop quality lesson plans and instructional materials for their students has increased within the era of accountability. Mrstick et al. (2019) found that teachers identified lack of planning time along with an abundance of paperwork, meetings, and managing student behaviors as major stressors in their jobs. According to Mrstick et al. (2019), teachers of students with autism are responsible for teaching all content areas since they have all grade levels in their self-contained classrooms. Teachers are required to ensure that students with significant cognitive disabilities are showing academic progress on par with their non-disabled peers. Teachers are also tasked with managing problem behaviors which can impact or impede student learning. In addition to creating lesson plans for students with significant cognitive disabilities, these teachers also must develop individual education plans (IEP) and monitor data related to students' IEPs. Participants in the research conducted by Mrstick et al. (2019) shared that they stayed after school and still took work home and work on the weekends to meet the paperwork demands of the job. One participant shared that not only was there an expectation to teach the curriculum, but frequently to also make the curriculum (Mrstick et al., 2019). All these expectations place high demands on teachers as they were required to not just be Exceptional Student Education (ESE) experts, but also to be subject area experts for the multiple courses they teach. Teachers must therefore become familiar with the ESE Access Points and related general education

standards to be able to develop rigorous lesson activities and related instructional materials

Research Background

The problem addressed within this study was that special education teachers at a special education school were not completing lesson plans as required by the school and district. These special education teachers taught special education students in self-contained classrooms. There were multiple grade levels in each classroom, which required teachers to prepare lesson plans specific to the grade level students were in, as well as to address students' specific learning needs. Teachers in the target school had to create lesson plans to meet multiple Access Points for each course to which students were assigned. Students were enrolled in six core courses and one elective course. This meant the teacher was responsible for creating six lesson plans addressing multiple Access Points each day. Most classes included students who were non-verbal; these students used pictures or gestures to communicate. Some students had physical disabilities in addition to their cognitive disabilities, which also impacted their ability to learn.

Research Questions and Findings

During the research study, teachers were interviewed at three points during the study to gain insight into their experience planning lessons for students with significant cognitive disabilities: (a) prior to the implementation of Professional Learning Community (PLC) planning sessions, (b) after 3 weeks of collaborative lesson planning in newly formed PLCs, and (c) at the end of 6 weeks of PLC lesson planning participation. There were three research questions for the study as follows.

Research Question 1 (before beginning collaborative planning PLC meetings). The focus of the first research question was to discover the experiences of teachers who had to individually plan detailed lessons for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenge prior to implementing PLC lesson planning sessions. During this first round of interviews, teachers maintained that effective planning takes time, that writing multiple lesson plans individually is too much for one teacher, that planning in isolation results in variable levels of effectiveness with lesson plans, and that the needs of students with significant cognitive disabilities are great. According to P1, there was not enough planning time to write all required lesson plans individually, plus create the instructional materials required to support implementation of the lesson plans. P1 found that "the job of teaching and instruction and assessment takes you outside the classroom into your home" as teachers did not have the time to do the work at school. P1 attributed some of the additional planning that was required to address the unique needs of the student population being served. According to P1, students with significant cognitive disabilities had "great and unique" needs which required teachers to create instructional materials that the students could manipulate to access their education. Examples included materials made on Boardmaker, and lesson activities that students could drag and drop in place. P2, P3, and P5 all concurred that creating lesson plans for six subjects was overwhelming. P2 stated that "having to do six subjects you have to have six times the work to do." This can result in teachers doing a good job on the lesson plan for one subject and then doing a poor job on the lesson plan for another subject. For this reason, P2 suggested that it is better for teachers "to have more ideas instead of just always trying to find your own idea." P3 posited that when teachers are responsible for creating more

than two lesson plans it becomes “too much to handle.” P3 was of the view that having teachers work on creating one or two lesson plans results in a better-quality lesson plan; however, having to create six lesson plans is challenging due to the time constraint. P5 shared that the amount of time required to complete quality lesson plans resulted in teachers having to complete work at home to meet the demands and time constraints.

Research Question 2 (after 3 weeks of collaborative planning PLC meetings). The focus of the second research question was to discover the experience of learning to plan lessons for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenges together in a Professional Learning Community (PLC). During this second round of interviews, teachers maintained that collaborative lesson planning resulted in increased teacher confidence and teachers need protected planning time to develop quality lesson plans. All participants agreed that the experience of learning to plan lessons for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenges together in a professional learning community was beneficial to teachers and led to teachers feeling empowered and more confident about succeeding with lesson planning and meeting the district’s expectation. P1 reported feeling empowered after meeting with other teachers for collaborative lesson planning and PLC meetings. P1 found the collaborative experience to be of great benefit. According to P1, “it is a win win when teachers can come together and share ideas.” P1 noted that he was constantly learning from his peers which helped guide his professional practice and enhanced his own teaching skills. P1 concluded that the improvement in the quality of lesson plans resulted in a lot of progress in student learning. P1 attributed this improvement in student learning to increased use of small group instruction incorporated in the lesson plans. The one recommendation P1 had was for the time assigned to

teachers for lesson planning be protected and be dedicated to lesson planning. According to P1, time is the problem; the current time is "not even adequate because you find yourself doing many other little things." P1 recommended that teachers be allowed to sit down and work on their lesson plan during time assigned for lesson planning, instead of just talking about the planning process. Yuan and Zhang (2016) found that providing the structural conditions for collaboration does not ensure in-depth teacher collaboration at the outset. This type of teacher collaboration takes time. In the initial stages it is normal for teachers to meet to discuss the teaching objectives and materials and then assign tasks to individual teachers. Teachers then create the assigned lesson plans in isolation and share them with their peers without any further discussion. This sometimes made it difficult for teachers to understand and implement the shared lesson plans. Yuan and Zhang (2016) discovered that incorporating time for teachers to share their rationale for how they designed the lesson and allowing other teachers to provide ideas and recommendations for changes to the lesson plans resulted in positive effects on teaching and professional learning. P2 stated that the collaborative lesson planning process helps teachers develop good lesson plans. According to P2, engaging in collaborative lesson planning makes the job of developing lesson plans that meet school and district expectation more doable as there are more people creating the lesson plans which makes teachers feel like they can rely on others and learn from what they are doing. P3, P4, P5, and P6 agreed with this viewpoint and stated that planning with other teachers was a great experience which increased teacher confidence in and ability to create quality lesson plans. According to P3, collaborating with other teachers also improved teaching and instruction as teachers were learning from each other. P4 stated that collaborating on

lesson planning and during PLC meetings led to him feel more comfortable with the lesson planning process as it allowed more time for him to focus on creating lesson plans that meet the unique needs of students. P3 argued that this collaboration resulted in improved teacher efficacy because teachers worked collaboratively with other teachers who were experienced and capable of teaching. According to P3, an additional benefit of the collaboration is that students have the better lesson plans and the better educational experiences as teachers have more time to focus on incorporating research-based instructional strategies into their lesson plans. P5 added that planning lessons with peers leads to better quality lesson plans for students which results in students learning more. P6 agreed and stated that planning lesson with peers made the lesson plans more effective and that students were more engaged in lessons which is reflected in increases on their assessment scores. P6 reported feeling "even more confident, more of an expert with lesson plans" as a result of collaborating with more experienced teachers, administrators, and other staff. According to P6, being connected with other teachers who have more experience makes the collaborative lesson planning process less intimidating when navigating or creating a highly effective lesson plan.

Research Question 3 (after 6 weeks of collaborative lesson planning PLC meetings). The focus of the third research question was to discover the experience of planning lessons for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenges together in a PLC after learning and practicing the way of work. During this third round of interviews, teachers maintained that collaborative lesson planning better equipped teachers to meet requirements for lesson planning, lesson quality positively impacted student achievement, and teachers needed more planning time to develop quality lesson

plans. All participants agreed that engaging in collaborative lesson planning imparted a kind of confidence in teachers and had a positive impact on student achievement. Shinn (2015) found that teachers want to collaborate and be an integral part of a team to gain support and new knowledge. Shinn (2015) claimed that a major reason why special education teachers stay in the field of special education was collegial support and the availability and opportunities for teachers to collaborate with other personnel. Yuan and Zhang (2016) concluded that "the establishment of a collaborative culture is an evolving process permeated with various contextual challenges" (p. 823). According to P1, participating in collaborative lesson planning and PLC meetings led teachers to be more effective as they learned from each other and knew more about what each teacher was doing in their respective classrooms, the different strategies that teacher were implementing, and the impact they had on student achievement. P1 argued that collaborating is the way to more forward and is the model that should be practiced. P1 reported commendable growth in students both in their behavior and their academic performance. Considering all this, P1 added that time is still a constraint to teachers being able to do the necessary research and get appropriate materials to meet the unique needs of students. According to P1, there is limited availability of prepared materials that meet the unique needs students with significant cognitive disabilities. Teachers must work at home to create materials for students and they are not compensated for this time. P2 agreed that teachers do not really have enough time to create all the lesson plans and instructional resources students require. Shinn (2015) found that a lack of time and collaboration were two reasons that negatively impacted retention of early-career special education teachers. Shinn (2015) stated that special education teachers have many duties

to complete including lesson plans. Often, early-career teachers do not believe they have sufficient time during the school day to complete the required tasks. According to P2, if teachers were given more time for lesson planning, they would collaborate more. P2 stated that it is really difficult to get anything done in 45 minutes, and that in order to collaborate, teachers would need more time. P2 further stated that lesson plans are better when there is collaboration. The lesson plans and lessons are more effective than when developed in isolation, which results in students learning more because they are receiving quality instruction. P3 reported feeling more confident and better able to write a better-quality lesson plan as a result of collaborating with others. According to P3, teachers shared ideas and feedback with each other during collaborative lesson planning and PLC meetings. P3 shared that teachers learned a lot about different educational trends and strategies that they could use with students. The information shared was then brought back to the classroom and implemented with students. According to P3, the lesson plans created during collaborative lesson planning were much clearer and better at meeting the unique needs of the students being served. These lesson plans included different strategies that could better meet the needs of the student with significant cognitive disabilities. This resulted in increased learning by students. P4 reported feeling more confident and comfortable with lesson planning as a result of participating in collaborative lesson planning and PLC meetings. P4 stated that this is an effective way to meet the needs of the students in his classroom. According to P4, teachers created a better-quality lesson plan after collaborating with others. These newly developed lesson plans include a variety of instructional strategies. P4 noted that students learned better when taught with different strategies instead of relying on the *talk and chalk* strategy.

This led to improved students learning. P4 concluded that “every district should encourage a collaborative effort in terms of planning lessons and put together strategies and tools to meet the needs of our children.” P5 was of the view that working together in collaborative lesson planning and PLC meetings was a good thing. P5 claimed that working collaboratively resulted in lesson plans including a wider variety of instructional strategies which helps students learn more and improve with their academics. P5 was of the view, however, that teachers still do not have enough time to complete all the requirements of creating quality lesson plans. Teachers still have to complete work at home to develop a quality lesson plan. P6 agreed with this; according to P6, it felt good to meet with peers and talk to them about how things were going in their classrooms with the lessons and students. It helped teachers know if the lesson plans were successful or if there were things that needed to be changed. According to P6, participating in collaborative lesson planning led to teachers feeling more effective and more confident as they learned new strategies for working with students with significant cognitive disabilities. P6 reported feeling good about the collaborative process as teachers were collaborating with others who had different knowledge, experience, and training that they could share. This led to increased teacher confidence over the course of the collaborative lesson planning and PLC meeting process. P6 found that the increased quality of the lesson plans has also led to improved student learning. P6 reported being better able to meet the needs of all students despite their cognitive levels. However, P6 is of the opinion that there is still not enough time to get everything done. P6 wished there were more time to learn about different strategies to help students that are not making adequate progress.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. These include the small number of participants in the study. The study included training and interviews with six teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities. This may make it difficult to generalize the results to all teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities. In addition, all participants worked at the same school, which represents a very limited geographical area, so the findings may not be representative of the views of teachers in a wider geographic area. All participants in this study worked at a center school with 100% ESE enrollment. The researcher is uncertain if the challenges identified by these six teachers reflect those experienced by teachers who work in center sites on a traditional school campus, or to teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities nationally or internationally. There is also limited research that addressed collaborative lesson planning among teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities or with teachers who teach multiple grade levels in self-contained classrooms. The researcher was unable to locate any study that examined the experience of teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities and their perspectives about the potential benefits or frustrations of participating in PLCs to help develop lesson plans. Finally, the researcher is also the supervising administrator for the teachers who participated in this research study; therefore, even though participation in the research study was voluntary and participants were encouraged to provide honest responses and feedback to the research questions, due to the supervisory role of the researcher, teachers may not necessarily have responded openly and honestly, and may not have expressed their true feelings during the interviews.

Conclusions

The focus of this dissertation was to conduct a generic qualitative research to learn firsthand from the teachers about the experience of planning lessons for students with significant disabilities. Interviews were conducted at three points: before implementation of the collaborative lesson planning sessions, 3 weeks after beginning collaborative lesson planning sessions, and again after 6 weeks of collaborative lesson planning and practice. There was consensus among research participants that effective lesson planning takes time and planning in isolation is less effective as the quality of lesson plans developed this way is poor. Farmer (2020) found that due to demands of their jobs and emotional stress involved in teaching students with significant needs, special education teachers experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion and lower levels of personal accomplishment than their general education peers. Shinn (2015) concluded that special education teachers need to collaborate with other staff members and that this enables them to feel like a supported part of the school community. According to participants, participation in collaborative lesson planning and PLC meetings better equips teachers to meet requirements for lesson planning, improves the overall quality of lesson plans, and positively impacts student achievement. Participants were of the view that teachers need more protected planning time to develop quality lesson plans as the current amount of time (45 minutes daily) is not sufficient to research the Access Points, develop the lesson plan, and create needed instructional materials and resources to teach students at their cognitive level. In addition, teachers shared that participating in collaborative lesson planning increased teacher confidence and self-efficacy as teachers shared ideas and strategies empowering each other to try strategies

with their students that other teachers had implemented successfully. Teachers already face a heavy workload which may take them away from actively engaging in the collaborative lesson planning process (Yuan & Zhang, 2016). Yuan and Zhang (2016) stated that it is important for administrators to provide opportunities and incentives to support teachers working collaboratively. For example, administrators may adjust the teacher workday to build in time for collaborative lesson planning meetings. They can create space and structures to facilitate collaboration among teachers and create a safe environment where teachers feel free to raise questions about the lesson plans and share different views about lesson development. Once teachers begin to view collaboration as a way to improve their professional practice, it will become more culturally embedded.

Recommendations for Future Research

The lack of existing research on the experience of engaging in collaborative lesson planning among teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities was a limitation of this research study, but it also brought the opportunity to do this research and thus make recommendations for future research. Given the positive response to planning collaboratively on teachers' efficacy as well as student outcomes, this study should be replicated in other locations and even with other populations of students with disabilities to see if the same positive responses hold across other locations, times, and student populations. Using a larger and more diverse sample size may yield more generalizable results.

One recommendation is to allow teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities more time to collaboratively plan lessons to see if this yields a more satisfying work-life balance while also meeting the unique needs of these students. Another

recommendation for future research is to look at the viability and effectiveness of departmentalization among teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities. One teacher mentioned this as a practice at a previous work location but expressed concerns about increases in student behaviors among students with behavior challenges or challenges with transitioning from one location or teacher to another. Finally, it may be beneficial to research whether or not teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities teaching in a self-contained classroom may benefit from receiving specific training on how to implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in their lesson plans and in their classrooms. Further, this may impact teachers' ability to develop quality lesson plans and measure the impact this may have on teacher efficacy and student achievement. CAST (2018) defined UDL as a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn. UDL focuses on three main guidelines to meet the diverse learning needs of all learners; they are engagement, representation, and action and expression. According to Takemae, Dobbins, and Kurtts (2018), the UDL lesson plan form can be easy to follow when it comes to planning and teaching UDL lessons in classrooms. This may help teachers discover more innovative and engaging ways to meet the diverse needs of all their students (Takemae, Dobbins, & Kurtts 2018). These future research recommendations would aide school-based administrators and district leaders nationally and internationally to better support teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities, and perhaps all teachers in developing supports for lesson planning and implementation.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

The researcher will learn directly from teachers of students with significant cognitive disabilities about their experiences of planning lessons for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Questions will be asked of teachers at three points during the study: (a) during business as usual individual planning prior to the implementation of Professional Learning Community (PLC) planning sessions, (b) after 3 weeks of collaborative lesson planning in newly formed PLCs, and (c) at the end of 6 weeks of PLC lesson planning participation. The focus of interview questions will be on teachers' experiences in terms of the process of planning, teacher self-efficacy, incorporating high impact instructional strategies, and meeting district and school expectations for preparing lessons.

Pre interview Scripts

1. **Welcome participants and thank them for being willing to participate in the interview phase of the study.**
2. **Inform participants of the projected duration of the interview.**
3. **Explain the purpose of the study.**
4. **Explain the type of research (generic qualitative research).**
5. **Review with participants the protocols in place for keeping the data collected during the research secure,**
6. **Encourage participants to be as honest as possible during their responses as this study will hopefully help other teachers in similar assignments,**
7. **Explain to participants that they will be provided an opportunity to review their interview scripts and make corrections as needed, or changes to their responses before final submission,**
8. **Inform participants that verbatim sections of their responses may be included in the final dissertation report, but that no other identifiable information will be included.**

9. **Review aspects of the consent form and verify that participant is still ok with being recorded during the interview.**
10. **Explain that participants may indicate if they want the recorder turned off at any point during the interview, or if something they say during the interview should be excluded or is "off the record."**
11. **Verify if the participant has any questions before beginning the interview.**

Interview Questions

Interview 1 (before beginning collaborative planning PLC meetings). Questions 1 to 8 below will be used to answer research question 1. What was the experience of individually planning detailed lessons for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenge prior to implementing PLC lesson planning sessions?

1. How do you feel about planning lessons by yourself for your students with severe cognitive disabilities?
2. What is it like to consider the significant needs of the students while independently planning instruction?
3. What does it feel like to plan and deliver lessons independently in terms of your effectiveness (self-efficacy)?
4. What does it feel like to plan and deliver lessons independently in terms of building in high impact instructional strategies?
5. What does it feel like to plan and deliver lessons independently in terms of lesson quality?
6. What does it feel like to plan and deliver lessons independently in terms of student learning?
7. What does it feel like to plan and deliver lessons independently in terms of lesson success/failure?
8. What does it feel like to plan and deliver lessons independently in terms of meeting district and school expectations for preparing lessons?

Interview 2 (after 3 weeks of collaborative planning PLC meetings). Questions 9 to 17 will be used to answer research question 2. What was the experience of learning to plan lessons for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenges together in a Professional Learning Community (PLC)?

9. What does it feel like to work with other teachers to jointly plan lessons in terms of comfort (nervousness, exposure, confidence, for example)?
10. How do you feel about learning a new way of working together?
11. How do you feel about planning lessons collaboratively?

12. How do you feel about your effectiveness (self-efficacy) when you plan lessons collaboratively?
13. How do you feel about building high impact instructional strategies into your lesson plans now that you are planning with others?
14. How do you feel about the quality of your newly delivered lessons as you have planned with peers?
15. How do you feel about the quality of student learning now that you have begun to plan lessons with peers?
16. How do you feel about your new lesson successes or failures?
17. How do you now feel about meeting district and school expectations for preparing lessons?

Interview 3 (after 6 weeks of collaborative lesson planning PLC meetings). Questions 18 to 25 will be used to answer research question 3. What was the experience of planning lessons for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenges together in a PLC after learning and practicing the way of work?

18. How do you now feel about the process of working with other teachers to collaboratively plan lessons?
19. What does it feel like to continue to plan with peers in terms of your comfort level (nervousness, exposure, confidence, for example)?
20. How do you feel about your effectiveness (self-efficacy) when you plan lessons collaboratively?
21. How do you feel about building high impact instructional strategies into your lesson plans now that you are planning with others?
22. How do you feel about the quality of your newly delivered lessons as you have planned with peers?
23. How do you feel about the quality of student learning now that you have begun to plan lessons with peers?
24. How do you feel about your new lesson successes or failures?
25. How do you now feel about meeting district and school expectations for preparing lessons?

Post Interview Scripts

1. **After the interview, thank the participant for his or her time, and for honestly sharing information and feelings.**
2. **Ask the participant if there is anything that wasn't asked during the interview that he or she would like to add or share.**
3. **Schedule a follow up session with the participant to review the transcribed interview script.**

4. **Provide the participant with primary researcher's contact information in case he or she has any questions or concerns after the interview.**
5. **Inform the participant that if he or she would like a copy of the final dissertation report he or she may contact the primary researcher.**

Appendix B

Professional Learning Community Weekly Agenda

Appendix B

Professional Learning Community Weekly Agenda

Meeting Agenda for:

Week 1

Meeting Facilitator:

Meeting Participant Names:

Time (in minutes)	**Task**	**Objective**	**Outcome**
2 minutes	Opening Remarks	Meet, greet, review norms	
8 minutes	Targeted Professional Development	Establishing clear learning goals (Setting Objectives)	Create learning goals for each core subject area according to guidelines
30 minutes	Collaborative Lesson Planning	ELA: Exploring resources – focus calendar, scope and sequence documents, sample lesson plans, Unique Learning System etc.	Unit lesson outline for ELA
5 minutes	Closing Remarks	Close, determine resources needed for next time	

Professional Learning Community Weekly Agenda

Meeting Agenda for:

Week 2

Meeting Facilitator:

Meeting Participant Names:

Time (in minutes)	**Task**	**Objective**	**Outcome**
2 minutes	Opening Remarks	Meet, greet, review norms	
8 minutes	Targeted Professional Development	Helping students track their progress (Providing Feedback)	
30 minutes	Collaborative Lesson Planning	Math: Develop pre/post assessment aligned with Access Points (beginning with the end in mind)	Pre/post unit assessment for Math
5 minutes	Closing Remarks	Close, determine resources needed for next time	

Professional Learning Community Weekly Agenda

Meeting Agenda for:

Week 3

Meeting Facilitator:

Meeting Participant Names:

Time (in minutes)	**Task**	**Objective**	**Outcome**
2 minutes	Opening Remarks	Meet, greet, review norms	
8 minutes	Targeted Professional Development	Using small groups in a powerful way (cooperative learning)	Plans for grouping students in small groups
30 minutes	Collaborative Lesson Planning	Science: Developing the scale/rubric	Scale/rubric aligned with the Access Points
5 minutes	Closing Remarks	Close, determine resources needed for next time	

Professional Learning Community Weekly Agenda

Meeting Agenda for:

Week 4

Meeting Facilitator:

Meeting Participant Names:

Time (in minutes)	**Task**	**Objective**	**Outcome**
2 minutes	Opening Remarks	Meet, greet, review norms	
8 minutes	Targeted Professional Development	Using graphic organizers: identifying similarities and differences, summarizing and note taking	Plans for using graphic organizers and non-linguistic representations
30 minutes	Collaborative Lesson Planning	Social Studies: Lesson procedures (organizing students to interact with new content vs. helping students practice and deepen knowledge	Written outline of lesson procedures for Science
5 minutes	Closing Remarks	Close, determine resources needed for next time	

Professional Learning Community Weekly Agenda

Meeting Agenda for:

Week 5

Meeting Facilitator:

Meeting Participant Names:

Time (in minutes)	**Task**	**Objective**	**Outcome**
2 minutes	Opening Remarks	Meet, greet, review norms	
8 minutes	Targeted Professional Development	Using task analysis to teach chained skills	Task analysis for an IEP goal
30 minutes	Collaborative Lesson Planning	ELA: Preparing instructional materials (Boardmaker pictures, assistive technology, Smart Learning Suite)	Instructional materials for ELA unit
5 minutes	Closing Remarks	Close, determine resources needed for next time	

Professional Learning Community Weekly Agenda

Meeting Agenda for:

Week 6

Meeting Facilitator:

Meeting Participant Names:

Time (in minutes)	**Task**	**Objective**	**Outcome**
2 minutes	Opening Remarks	Meet, greet, review norms	
8 minutes	Targeted Professional Development	Time delay to teach discrete skills	Plan for implementing time delay to teach discrete skills
30 minutes	Collaborative Lesson Planning	Math: pre/post test data review	Determine student need for intervention/enrichment
5 minutes	Closing Remarks	Close, determine resources needed for next time	