ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to describe preservice special education teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about collaboration as a professional practice. It has been established through national teacher and accreditation standards, through federal policy, and through emphasis from the field of teaching special education that collaboration skills are an important part of teacher training. The research questions guiding this study are: (a) What are preservice special education teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about collaboration as a professional practice, (b) What challenges do preservice special education teachers report as obstructing collaboration in their school environments, and (c) After completing coursework in collaboration, how prepared to collaborate do these teachers feel?

Due to the descriptive nature of the research questions asked, a qualitative case study design was used for this study. Purposeful sampling yielded twelve participants who were currently taking a course titled, Collaboration among Professionals and Families. Inductive analysis was used to analyze documents, interviews, and online communication. This analysis resulted in six overarching themes which contained 27 code categories.
Results showed that participants believed that collaboration as a professional practice led to positive outcomes for students. Despite this belief, collaboration was described as fraught with challenges, in particular the inability to share power between special education teachers and general education teachers. The majority of the participants reported feeling equipped to collaborate as they prepared to enter the teaching field. Implications for teacher education programs and future research are presented.

INDEX WORDS: collaboration, co-teaching, special education teacher preparation, reflective practice, teacher efficacy, self-efficacy, online learning environment, conflict, qualitative study
PREPARING FOR COLLABORATION: PRESERVICE SPECIAL EDUCATION
TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS AND BELIEFS

by

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PREPARING FOR COLLABORATION: PRESERVICE SPECIAL EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving family, and in particular my patient husband, Jim, and my wonderful daughters, Wren and Meryl. The completion of this degree could not have been possible without my whole family’s encouragement, aid, and understanding.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The field of special education has been replete with articles on the importance of collaboration for successfully working with other professionals and families in today’s schools (e.g., Cramer & Strivers, 2007; Friend & Cook, 2005, 2007; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Villa & Thousand, 2000; Walter-Thomas, Korinek, & McLaughlin, 1999). No longer are educators and related service personnel providers (i.e. speech language pathologists, occupational therapists) expected to work in isolation holding sole responsibility for a set group of students. The climate of schools now demands collaborative efforts for working with students and optimizing students’ academic performance (Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Campbell, 1994; Friend & Cook, 2007; Gable, Mostert, & Tonelson, 2004). Indeed, collaborative practices can be found in many current school activities such as grade-level planning, co-teaching, parent involvement efforts, school reform initiatives, and formal meetings about students.

Friend and Cook’s (2007) definition for collaboration guides the research reported in the chapters that follow: “Interpersonal collaboration is a style for direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as the work toward a common goal” (p.7). For example, collaboration occurs when a grade-level team, including special educator (equal and voluntary), meet to discuss the choices for formative and summative assessment (shared decision making) in order to accurately gauge all students’ progress of academic standards (common goal). Thinking of collaboration as an interaction style allows for endless possibilities for collaborative efforts--formal and informal-- in school settings. Collaboration is neither synonymous with a particular instructional delivery method (i.e., co-
teaching) nor with inclusion of all students with disabilities (Friend, 2000; Walter-Thomas, et al., 1999).

Collaboration in education has been a key concept since the early 1970s when legislation for students with disabilities began to mandate the consideration of least restricted environment (LRE) as mainstream settings in which students with disabilities received their education alongside general education students. Currently, inclusive educational arrangements are strengthened through special education legislation that closes the environmental and educational gap between students with disabilities and general education students. The recent approval of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) 2004 regulations, including Response to Intervention, continued to taper what can qualify as LRE. LRE mandates that placement decisions for students with disabilities begin by considering the students’ full participation in the general education curriculum delivered in the general education classroom and move toward more segregated settings only after it is determined that the student is not successful without more restrictive supports (OSEP, sec. 614). According to new regulations, students suspected of having learning disabilities cannot be referred for special education evaluation until several levels of intervention within general education are found to be unsuccessful (OSEP, sec. 300). In addition, high stakes testing and increased teacher accountability, requirements embedded in the 2001 educational policy under No Child Left Behind, result in more students with disabilities receiving their instruction in the general education class (Turner, 2003). According to the national report on the implementation of IDEA from the Office of Special Education Programs (2005) data from the 2003 school year, almost half of the total population of students with disabilities (ages 6-17) had received their instruction in the general education classroom for approximately 80% of the day. In 2006 the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) commented on the effect of this legislation for the profession of teaching: “Like never before, NCLB and
IDEA require special and general educators to work collaboratively to assure high learning results for all students, including students with disabilities” (para.1). Collaboration between these educators has been the focus of substantial discourse within the field of special education (e.g., Friend & Cook, 1995; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Mastropieri, Scruggs, Graetz, Norland, Gardizi, & McDuffie, 2005; Murawski & Swanson, 2001; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007).

In addition to public policy, national teaching standards have emphasized effective collaboration by special educators. The CEC’s (2003) *What Every Special Educator Must Know* includes teacher behaviors such as modeling strategies for consultation and collaboration, and using co-teaching methods to increase student achievement in the classroom. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards *What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do* (2007) contains a standard that addresses the teacher as an active member in a diverse learning community. It states, “The increased practice of ‘mainstreaming’ special-needs students to assure that they are being educated in the least restrictive environment has meant that general and special education teachers need to work with one another” (p. 19). Finally, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2007) expects that teacher preparation programs will provide the pedagogical and professional knowledge required by teacher candidates in the professional setting: “They have a thorough understanding of the school, family, and community contexts in which they work, and they collaborate with the professional community to create meaningful learning experiences for all students” (NCATE, Standard 1c).

Collaboration between parents and special educators has been bolstered through these legislative and teaching standardization efforts. With the most recent reauthorization of IDEA (2004), parents continue to be included as an important member of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) team, and are expected to contribute to decisions which guide their students’ educational performance, assessment of that performance, behavioral considerations, and appropriate
accommodations and/or modifications. In short, parents of students with disabilities are expected to work with other school professionals in a collaborative style which goes beyond the traditional biennial parent-teacher conference seen in general education. The responsibility for fostering this collaborative relationship mainly lies with the special education teacher. This responsibility is evident in the standards for professional practice which guide the field (CEC, 2003). The standard, titled Parent Relationships, states that when special education teachers enter the field they should be able to “develop relationships with parents based on mutual respect for their roles in achieving benefits for the exceptional person” (p.2). This relationship can be accomplished by the special educator: (a) developing effective communication, (b) garnering and applying parent knowledge on special education services provided, (c) maintaining communication, (d) providing opportunities for parent education about special education, (e) informing parents of their rights and their students’ rights under special education law, (f) becoming aware of cultural differences within the family, and (g) realizing that home and community environments affect the exceptional person (CEC, 2003). The specificity of the above standard shows that the field of special education places enormous emphasis on the expectation that special educators will work collaboratively with parents.

Clearly, the current definition of an effective special educator includes proficiency with collaboration skills. They will be expected to share the responsibility of students with other teachers and parents. How then should special educators gain these vital collaboration skills for use in the twenty-first century schools? The two most common answers from the literature are: (a) professional development, which typically occurs after a teacher has entered the field (Austin, 2001; Bang & Lamb, 1996; Friend & Cook, 2007; Friend & Cook, 2005; Katsiyannis, Zhang, & Conroy, 2003; Keefe et al. 2004; Mastropieri et al.,2005; Scheuermann, Webber, Boutot, & Goodwin, 2003) and (b) teacher preparation programs (Arthaud et al., 2007; Austin, 2001;
Gallagher, Vail, & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Griffin & Pugach, 2007; Lovingfoss et al., 2001; Miller & Stayton, 2006; Otis-Wilborn et al., 2005; Turner, 2003). It is unclear which option of training is most common in the current teaching field and how effective these types of training are in preparing teachers for daily collaborative events.

The literature does reveal a perceived lack of training by teacher preparation programs about successful collaboration skills for educators (Austin, 2001; Billingsley, 2004; Cook & Friend, 1995; Deiker, 2001; Friend, 2000; Greene & Isaacs, 1999; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Keefe, Moore, & Duff, 2004; Laframboise, Epanchin, Colucci, & Hocutt, 2004; Lovingfoss, Eddy, Molloy, Harris, & Graham, 2001; Otis-Wilborn, Winn, Griffin & Kilgore, 2005; Turner, 2003). Researchers (e.g. Austin, 2001; Keefe & Moore, 2004) have proposed that teacher preparation programs fail to equip teachers with the unique skills necessary for co-teaching. Colleges have been accused of a “‘do as we say, not as we do’” attitude toward teaching instructional and behavioral techniques for the inclusive classroom (Greene & Isaacs; Kluth & Straut, 2003). In addition, teacher preparation programs in higher education often perpetuate the phenomena of segregated disciplinary roles and isolated practice (Bullock, Park, & Snow, 2002; Cook & Friend; Greene & Isaacs; Quinlan, 1998). According to Otis-Wilborn et al. teacher preparation programs have not taught “strategies for clarifying roles and building collaborations in formal and informal ways with general education teachers” (p.149). These programs produce teachers bound for professional placements feeling unprepared and inexperienced (Keefe & Moore, 2004; Thompson, 2001). Teachers report they lack “collaboration skills, content knowledge, and knowledge of special education” while attempting to work in collaborative settings (Keefe & Moore, p. 84). General education teachers report having a limited knowledge base about students with disabilities (Keefe & Moore; Laframbosie et al.; Otis-Wilborn et al.) while special educators report struggling with content knowledge (Cook & Friend; Keefe & Moore; Keefe et
al.; Laframboise et al.; Otis-Wilborn et al.). Furthermore, special education teacher preparation programs are criticized for inadequate training in collaboration skills for working with parents (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Whitbread, Bruder, Fleming, & Park, 2007).

Suggestions for the reform of teacher preparation programs from the field include the common thread of building better collaboration skills not just for special educators, but often for general educators as well. Repeatedly, the literature calls for higher education to initiate program changes which would prepare educators to work collaboratively with others (e.g., French & Chopra, 2006; Griffin & Pugach, 2007; Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2006; Villa, Thousand, & Chapple, 1996). Specifically, the proposed solutions for this dilemma include: (a) integrated teacher preparation programs with other disciplines such as elementary education, school psychology, or a specific content area (Griffin & Pugach, 2007; Miller & Stayton, 2006; Otis-Wilborn et al., 2005; Turner, 2003); (b) classes designed to teach collaboration skills (Arthaud et al., 2007; Austin, 2001; Gallagher, Vail, & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Lovingfoss et al., 2001); (c) inclusive student teaching placements (Lovingfoss et al.; Van Laarhoven et al., 2007); and (d) modeling co-teaching in the higher education classroom (Bakken et al., 1998; Cook & Friend, 1995; Duchardt, Marlow, Inman, Christensen, & Reeves, 1999; Greene & Isaacs, 1999; Kluth & Straut, 2003; Miller & Stayton, 2006; Waters & Burcoff, 2007).

**Rationale**

For the purpose of this study I will investigate the impact of coursework designed to teach preservice special education teachers collaboration skills for working with school professionals and parents. Although these classes are recommended (e.g., Arthaud et al., 2007; Austin, 2001; Lovingfoss et al., 2001; Villa et al., 1996), there is little discussion about how this coursework may influence the perspectives of preservice teachers as to how they view collaboration, and how prepared they feel to collaborate in their school community. Without
building this knowledge it continues to be difficult to assess how training at the preservice level influences the preservice teachers’ set of beliefs about collaboration, and influences their performance in collaborative events.

The evaluation of training in collaborative skills at the higher education level presents another challenge in preparing teachers to collaborate. How does one assess the knowledge of collaboration in their preservice teachers as well as the skill level of the behaviors necessary for collaboration? For example, in order to assess knowledge gained a multiple choice test could be given on course readings. This type of assessment fails to capture the performance of collaborative behaviors. The social-cognitive based theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) provides a framework for evaluating the training for such a multivariate concept as collaboration. Self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1997), “refers to the beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p.3). Self-efficacy theory states that how people believe they will behave in any given situation, and what the resulting outcomes are of their behaviors in a given situation have a direct influence on the actual performance of those behaviors. Teacher efficacy (Bandura, 1987, 1997; Gibson and Dembo, 1984, 1985), a particular construct of self-efficacy, has looked at the relationship between a teacher’s belief in their ability to educate students regardless of challenges present and their actual effectiveness of teaching. Collaboration, being equally as complex as classroom teaching, should be considered as a focus of teacher efficacy. A greater understanding of how preservice teachers believe collaboration works, including their perceptions of collaboration skills needed in school environments, would help to inform teacher preparation practices.

Throughout the literature on collaboration the voices of special education teachers, general education teachers, parents, and experts have been heard, but rarely have the voices of preservice teachers – our most invested consumers of teacher preparation programs – been given
prominence in the research. This valuable input can inform how to build best instructional practices and can validate the learning that occurs. According to Eisner (2002), a student’s perspective matters: “It is the understanding of the student’s experience that provides the most promising information for improving teaching and learning” (p.190). Notably, the literature is lacking detailed accounts of how preservice teachers perceive their learning about collaboration skills through coursework. It is from these consumers that special education teacher preparation programs can gain immediate feedback on the value and usefulness of coursework around collaboration skills.

An added layer of uniqueness to the issue of learning about collaboration in higher education is the increase of preservice teachers completing their coursework in an online environment. Online learning has begun to change the face of instruction across the nation. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2001-2002 over 50% of American public higher education institutions offered a distance education delivery model. Education was the most commonly identified field of study using this model. Teacher education programs may offer courses online due to practical concerns, such as high attrition rates, and policy pushes such as technology initiatives. Therefore, preservice special education teachers may increasingly find themselves completing part, or the entirety, of their coursework in an online learning environment as did the participants in this study.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to describe preservice special education teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about collaboration as a professional practice. It has been established through national teacher and accreditation standards, through federal policy, and through emphasis from the field of teaching special education that collaboration skills are an important part of teacher training. In addition, having this skill base is thought to support the
induction and retention of special education teachers in the field (Billingsley, 2004). However there is scant research on how preservice teachers view their collaboration skills while completing coursework in collaboration. Without building this knowledge it continues to be difficult to assess how training at the preservice level influences the preservice teachers’ set of beliefs about collaboration, and influences their performance in collaborative events. These perspectives are needed to continue critically addressing the training of future educators to work collaboratively in their school setting.

Research Questions and Definitions

The research questions guiding this study are: (a) What are preservice special education teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about collaboration as a professional practice, (b) What challenges do preservice special education teachers report as obstructing collaboration in their school environments, and (c) After completing coursework in collaboration, how prepared to collaborate do these teachers feel? The following definitions will be used throughout this study:

**Belief.** This is a conviction of truth of some statement or the reality of some being or phenomenon especially when based on examination of evidence (Merriam-Webster, 2009).

**Challenge.** A test of one’s abilities or resources in a demanding but stimulating undertaking (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2000).

**Perception.** This is defined as a result of perceiving and as a capacity for comprehension (Merriam-Webster, 2009).
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Special educators have been engaged in a discussion about collaboration since the passing of public law 94-142 in 1975 when students began to be included in their local school districts (Friend & Cook, 2007; Peterson, 1987). It has continued to be an important topic in teacher practices, family involvement, and school-wide reform. Emphases of collaborative skills have been suggested as an essential component for effective teacher preparation programs. According to Friend and Cook (2007), collaboration is comprised of six defining characteristics: (a) voluntary participation, (b) parity between members, (c) mutual goal in mind, (d) shared responsibility for decision making, (e) resources are shared, and (f) equal accountability for outcome. This chapter seeks to summarize current literature on collaboration in special education by first framing the literature on two key stakeholders in this process: (a) co-teachers, and (b) parents. Next, a brief portrait of current methods of teaching collaboration in higher education is presented. Special emphasis will be placed on studies which have investigated coursework on collaboration as that is similar in focus to my study presented here.

Who are Key Stakeholders in Collaboration?

Co-Teachers

The majority of the discourse around collaboration concerns co-teaching, an instructional delivery model in which a general education teacher and a special education teacher plan, deliver, assess, and evaluate instruction for a heterogeneous group of students. These teachers occupy the same space for all or part of the day. Seen as the strategy in which to implement the ideology of inclusion (Zigmond, 2003), co-teaching places new demands on both participants and on the
school community (Rea & Connell, 2005). The majority of the literature available deals with the perceptions of the educators involved with this model (Austin, 2001; Bang & Lamb, 1996; Keefe & Moore, 2004; Laframboise et al., 2004; Mastropieri et al., 2005, Scruggs et al., 2007). In these studies, teachers are asked to identify what they believe contributes to a successful co-teaching model and what they believe inhibits a successful co-teaching model. Common themes emerge from this literature: (a) Teachers must have adequate time to plan for instruction in order to provide high quality effective collaboration (Austin; Keefe & Moore; Laframboise et al.), (b) teachers succeed when clear roles and responsibilities are established prior to beginning this model of instruction (Keefe et al., 2004; Laframboise et al.; Mastropieri et al., 2005), (c) training through professional development or preservice work is essential for effective implementation (Austin; Bang & Lamb; Keefe & Moore; Laframboise et al.; Mastropieri et al.; Scruggs et al.). Educators, both Special and General, appear willing to accept the unique challenges offered by co-teaching. In return, they simply ask that system-level supports are in place to facilitate the best practice of this instructional model.

In a meta-synthesis of 32 qualitative research studies on co-teaching in the classroom, Scruggs et al. (2007) summarized the state of co-teaching. The researchers’ close analysis of thirteen years of qualitative research resulted in four overriding themes: (a) the benefits of co-teaching, (b) the needs for successful co-teaching, (c) co-teachers’ roles in the classroom, and (d) instructional style of co-teaching. In the majority of the studies analyzed, co-teachers expressed beliefs that co-teaching led to enhanced professional development, enhanced teacher attention for students without disabilities, and enhanced academic opportunities for students with disabilities. Teacher needs for successful co-teaching included voluntary placements in a co-teaching partnership, administrative support, and training. Teacher roles were described most commonly as the special educator acting in a supportive role. Co-teachers were most often reported as
teaching in a ‘one-teach, one assist’ model (p.405). This model has been criticized as providing the least effective use of instructional team when co-teaching. Lastly, Scruggs et al. concluded that elements necessary for co-teaching have been identified through the co-teachers who practice this form of instructional delivery. These elements need to be used to implement school-wide reforms focused on creating authentic collaboration.

What are benefits to co-teaching? While complex and demanding, this model has elicited positive reactions by teachers, students, and parents (Austin, 2001; Bang & Lamb, 1996; Gerber & Popp, 1999; Keefe et al., 2004; Kluth, & Straut, 2003). Educators who have participated in the collaborative model of teaching stated that, “professional growth and enhanced teaching motivation were results of their collaboration” (Kluth & Straut, 2003, p.229). Students have also reported pros of the collaborative teaching model. One study of students with learning disabilities from elementary to high school by Gerber and Popp (1999) quoted students with and without disabilities as saying that additional assistance was available in the co-taught classroom (pp.291-292). Other positive outcomes as reported by the students with disabilities were access to teacher strengths, increased organization, and a greater sense of self confidence (Gerber & Popp, 1999). Parents of students with disabilities in this same study reported increased student happiness and better participation in co-taught classes (Gerber & Popp, 1999). In Bang and Lamb’s (1996) study involving students with more severe disabilities, time spent in the general education classroom resulted in parent reports of decreased difficult behavior in their student, increased interactions with friends and neighbors, and increased comfort on the parents’ part in taking their student with disabilities out into the community. These were unintended generalization effects of the inclusive classroom.

What are the barriers to co-teaching? Throughout the literature, reference is made to the numerous known barriers to successful co-teaching. These challenges fall in three related areas:
Teacher factors which challenge behavior can be rigidity with teaching style (Mastropieri et al., 2005). When this occurs, either the general education or the special education teacher is unwilling to compromise on instructional format, behavior management, or classroom procedures so the co-teacher feels unwelcomed. In these cases, special education teachers report that they feel as if they are a teacher’s assistant and not a qualified teacher (Keefe et al., 2004; Walsh & Jones, 2004).

Relationship variables such as personality and communication style can negatively impact a co-teaching partnership (Mastropieri et al.). A teacher may unwillingly be assigned to a co-teaching class without having an opportunity to match their personality and instructional style to another teacher. These pairs can often end in the dissolution of the co-teaching setting. Mastropieri and colleagues found that one out of four co-taught partnerships they observed ended in the special education teacher moving half the students into a separate room in order to teach. When the administration was queried as to their hypothesis on the dissolution, the co-teachers lack of choice in co-teaching partners was offered as the disruptive factor.

Next, barriers at an administration level are apparent throughout the research. Lack of common planning time and scheduling conflicts were cited as challenges in the co-teaching model (Keefe et al., 2004; Laframboise et al., 2004; Murray, 2004). Scheduling is essentially an administrative decision. Only at this level can decisions be made that would maximize the co-teaching pair. It could be a move to block scheduling, a departmentalizing of special education, or a shuffling of students with disabilities so that their needs can best be met. A lack of support for co-teaching has also been found at the administrative level (Murray, 2004). This perceived deficit may stem from a lack of experience of or knowledge of the co-teaching model. One article in particular, *Minding the Fine Points of Co-Teaching*, by Rea and Connell (2005), details the need for professional development for administrators in order to better support a co-teaching
classroom or collaborative school. An administrator should be well-versed enough in the recommended practices of co-teaching to be able to support the implementation and evaluation of co-teaching that occurs in his/her building. Rea and Connell (2005) suggest an administrator create a, “mutually acceptable, clear, and flexible plan” driven by essential questions with heavy observation and evaluation pieces (p.3). This article cries out for standards in co-teaching which are expected and enforced at the system-level. The premise for this advice is that without a strong commitment to co-teaching and its potential benefits for the students with and without disabilities, how can co-teaching succeed? If the administration is not willing to invest time and effort in the same way that they invest in the instructional practices of the general education teachers in their school, why should the co-teachers invest the extra time and effort? More practically, if the administration does not remove barriers to co-teaching such as planning time, resources, training, and teacher relationship, how can this model succeed?

Lastly, the system-level barrier most identified by the literature is lack of preparation for co-teaching (Austin, 2001; Bang & Lamb, 1996; Keefe et al. 2004; Mastropieri et al., 2005). General education teachers have disclosed that they do not have professional development or preservice experience to prepare them for teaching students with disabilities in the classroom (Keefe et al., 2004; Murray, 2004). While exploring teachers’ beliefs about co-teaching, Austin (2001) found that although both special education and general education teachers rated in-service training as very important in value, they rated it significantly less important in practice. This disparity may have occurred due to system constraints on the teachers’ access to this type of training. If at the system-level of their schools, collaborative teaching was not considered a high professional development need, they may dismiss this training as well. Austin recommended appropriate training in preservice and in-service arenas as well as increased system level supports in order to create an effective co-teaching structure. Bang and Lamb (1996) reported
that teachers involved with co-teaching rated the district level opportunities for professional development as ineffective or nonexistent.

Parents

Parents have been at the forefront of special education reform since Public Law 94-142, a law that resulted from parent activism on behalf of their children with disabilities, was passed in the early 1970’s. The focus on collaborating between education professionals and parents gained increased importance with the early intervention contingent of special education. Establishing fruitful working relationship with parents of young children with disabilities has been a cornerstone of early childhood special education’s philosophies and practices (Dunst, 2002; Odom & Diamond, 1998). It is accepted best practice to provide services for young children with disabilities in natural environments such as the child’s home, and to plan each child’s Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) with the family’s concerns and goals foremost in mind (Jung, Gomez, & Baird, 2004; Keilty, 2008; Ridgley & Kelley, 2008;). It is also expected that building collaboration with parents would be a component of special educators’ training: “An understanding of parents’ views of and roles in the placement process should be an integral aspect of professional preparation and professional practice” (Harry, 2008, p. 372). Clearly, the expectation of parent collaboration in making decisions about their student’s IEP is embedded in IDEA (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson,& Beegle, 2004; Harry, 2008; Martin, Huber Marshall, Sale, 2004; Whitbread, Bruder, Fleming, & Park, 2007). For example, parents are required to be invited to every meeting, asked to contribute to the writing of the IEP, and often relied upon as behavioral consultations for their children. Yet despite the expectation of parent-teacher collaboration, the literature reports that this relationship has been fraught with challenges and frustrations (Blue-Banning et al.; Friend & Cook, 2007; Harry, 2004; Muscott, Szczesiul, Berk, Staub, Hoover, & Perry-Chisholm, 2008). In addition, research has found that as children
progress through their school career, the intensity of parent involvement lessens (Bauer & Shea, 2003; Dunst, 2002). This lessening could be a result of ineffective parent-special educator collaboration due to poorly prepared special educators. Summarized below are the benefits and the barriers from the literature on collaboration between special educators and parents.

What are the benefits of collaborating with parents? Research on parent involvement suggests a positive correlation between academic achievement and parent involvement in school (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). For students with disabilities where parents are expected to significantly contribute on an annual basis to their students’ educational plan, this involvement may carry even greater implications. Parents of children with behavioral difficulties provide critical information on the occurrence, function, and maintenance of a behavior (Tyrell, Horn, & Freeman, 2006). Without this comprehensive view of the student, intervention attempts could be misguided. Collaboration between special educators and parents has been responsible for improving student outcomes (Murray & Curran, 2008; Muscott et al., 2008; Sebald & Luckner, 2007). In addition, the information sharing which occurs in the parent-educator partnership can promote the parent’s advocacy abilities: “Parents can be the best advocates for and supporters of their children with special needs when they are armed with information, encouragement, and optimism” (Gallagher, Fialka, Rhodes, & Arceneaux, 2004, p.9).

What are the barriers to collaborating with parents? When identifying barriers to collaboration between educators and parents, it is important to realize that the research skews. In most of the literature, the special educator is portrayed as the negligent party in the partnership. Friend and Cook (2007) offer an interesting perspective when they suggest that it is neither always appropriate nor feasible to collaborate with parents. In short, an educator can proceed with the best intentions of collaborating with a parent, only to have the parent reject their advances. They suggest that collaboration expectations should be based on the willingness and
ability of each individual parent to participate in their student’s schooling. Bauer and Shea (2003) suggested that in order to work with parents, an educator may compete with time constraints and negative impressions of the school environment.

Common themes on barriers to collaboration appear in the literature. These themes are (a) parity, (b) communication and language, (c) knowledge, (d) culture and race, and (e) roles. Parents expressed frustration over feeling less than equal to their professional partner (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Friend & Cook, 2007; Lytle & Bordin, 2001; Muscott et al., 2008). Disparity can occur when a parent’s view is not taken seriously or when an educator presents information to the parent as the expert in the relationship (Blue-Banning et al.). Parents may have different priorities for their student that educators fail to validate (Fiakla, 2004).

Communication and the use of certain types of language are also identified barriers. Parents report not having sufficient information from educators (Blue-Banning et al.). When an educator uses language that is full of educational jargon, it communicates insider status for the educator and outsider status for the parent. It also contributes to the next mentioned barrier, knowledge, by causing parents to feel less knowledgeable than the educator. Parents may feel that they do not have the knowledge to make suggestions that would impact their students’ education (Friend & Cook; Muscott et al.) This may be especially true of parents who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Harry, 2008). Cultural and racial biases may challenge the collaborative partnership between parents and special educators (Friend & Cook; Harry; Muscott et al.; Whitbread et al.). Parents of a different culture may have radically contradictory views on disabilities than the dominant cultural view of the educator. In addition, parents of some cultures may seem hesitant to contribute to discussions about their child in deference to the educator’s position of authority (Harry). Next, unclear roles and responsibilities in parent and educator collaboration have been identified as challenging collaboration. Parents and educators may have
opposing expectations as to the extent of the parent’s or educator’s involvement (Blue-Banning et al.). Parents may feel unsure as to what they can contribute to their student’s IEP (Lytle & Bordin). Finally, a lack of preparation in teacher education programs has been repeatedly acknowledged by the research on parent-educator collaboration (Blue-Banning et al.; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Harry; Muscott et al.; Whitbread et al.). According to Blue-Banning et al. a “lack of development in both research and personnel preparation programs makes it difficult to implement collaborative partnerships because professionals do not know, in operational ways, what is expected of them” (p. 169).

**How are Teacher Education Programs Teaching about Collaboration?**

Throughout the review of the previous literature on collaboration among co-teachers and among educators and parents, common consensus has been that teacher preparation programs carry the responsibility to provide training on collaboration skills. The criticism has been that higher education continues to function in disconnected ways where faculty members from separate education departments rarely plan or teach cross disciplinary coursework (Griffin & Pugach, 2007). As mentioned in Chapter 1 program reform efforts have occurred in various ways: (a) integrated teacher preparation programs with other disciplines such as elementary education, school psychology, or a specific content area (Griffin & Pugach; Miller & Stayton, 2006; Otis-Wilborn et al., 2005; Ross, Stafford, Church-Pupke, & Bondy, 2006; Turner, 2003); (b) classes designed to teach collaboration skills (Arthaud et al., 2007; Austin, 2001; Gallagher, Vail, & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Lovingfoss et al., 2001; Smith, Frey, & Tollefson, 2003); (c) inclusive student teaching placements (Lovingfoss et al.; Van Laarhoven et al., 2007; Wilson Kamens, 2007); and (d) modeling co-teaching in the higher education classroom (Bakken et al., 1998; Duchardt, Marlow, Inman, Christensen, & Reeves, 1999; Cook & Friend, 1995; Greene & Isaacs, 1999; Kluth & Straut, 2003; Miller & Stayton, 2006; Waters & Burcoff, 2007; Winn-
Reflective Practice in Teacher Education

According to Brookfield (1988) reflection on one’s action is a pivotal activity for the education and training of adults. He described reflection as a process in which one gained knowledge and then tested that knowledge. In addition, Brookfield said that, “explorations of new ideas, skills, or bodies of knowledge do not take place in a vacuum but are set within the context of learners’ past, current, and future experiences” (p.102). Before discussing the particulars of coursework in collaboration, it is necessary to discuss the use of reflective practices in teacher education. This discussion is necessary due to its prominence in the literature on teacher education (Canning, 1991; Dieker & Monda-Amaya, 1995, 1997; Hartford & MacRuaire, 2008) and on online learning (Cook-Sather, 2007; Frey, 2008; Levine, 2007; Merkley, Dufflemeyer, Beed, Jensen & Bobys, 2007; Whipp, 2003). It also guides the instructional activities used and research questions proposed by my study.

Reflective practice is a theory of instruction and learning which expanded Dewey’s original ideas in the 1930’s into Schon’s continued scholarship in the 1980’s. According to Schon (1983; 1987) traditional higher education had been ruled by “technical rationality”, a term describing an empirically-based education in which the instructor disseminates a finite body of knowledge to students from which students then select information to use in their daily practice. Schon (1987) argued that successful practitioners would not be able to rest on background knowledge alone: “When a practitioner recognizes a situation as unique, she cannot handle it solely by applying theories or techniques derived from her store of professional knowledge” (p.6). Instead, Schon (1987) proposed that successful practitioners are successful problem-solvers; creating solutions within daily practice and not removed from it. Successful practitioners
often use reflection-in-action, where they problem solve as the action is taking place, and use reflection-on action, where they recall their problem solving efforts after the action has occurred. Certainly these two actions are replete in a teacher’s daily collaboration and instruction. Therefore, it is easy to see why this pedagogical theory influenced the state of teacher education and the types of activities and instructions that students are asked to do today.

Zeichner (1996) proposed that Schon’s theory of a reflective practitioner led to major reforms in teacher education during the past two decades. At the basis of this movement, Zeichner believed, was the belief that “teachers should play active roles in formulating the purposes and ends of their work” (p. 199). New knowledge about teaching should not be confined to the theories and research articles produced by academia. Zeichner stated that educating teachers to be reflective practitioners meant an underlying respect for teacher created theories on learning. In this way, the movement towards reflective practices in teacher education resulted in empowering preservice and inservice teachers. Zeichner cautioned that before teacher empowerment could be claimed, a teacher education program would have to support reflective practices which resulted in authentic reflection, and not the “illusion of teacher development and teacher autonomy” (p. 206).

Within the teacher education literature, Sparks-Langer and Colton (1991) synthesized the research on teachers’ reflective thinking. They posited that three elements of reflective practice have been the focus of the research: (a) a cognitive element, or how teachers use their reflections for decision making; (b) a critical element, or how teachers incorporate outside forces, such as school culture or social relationships in their reflective thinking; and (c) a narrative element, or research in which a teacher’s story is collected and analyzed. Sparks-Langer and Colton summarized the impact of reflective thinking in teacher education by drawing attention to such instructional practices as reflective journal writing, self-analysis of video recorded teaching, and
the use of case studies which present problematic issues in teaching. In addition, they found that the articles included in their synthesis supported the belief in teachers creating their own meaning of their professional practices while considering the theoretical frameworks, research, and outside resources available to them. Lastly, Sparks-Langer and Colton concluded: “Future research needs to explore how teachers interpret, give meaning to, and make decisions about their experiences in schools” (p.43). This review highlighted that reflective practices for teacher educators have infiltrated the way teacher education programs think about teaching, and that reflective practices are viewed as a powerful and legitimate means to increase the professional development in the education field.

Coursework in Collaboration

A small literature base exists on the use of coursework in collaboration skills as a mechanism to prepare preservice special education teachers for the complex interactions ahead of them (Bradley & Monda-Amaya, 2002; Gallagher et al., 2008; Welch & Brownell, 2002). Welch and Brownell compared 3 groups of participants’ cognitive knowledge about collaboration and attitudes and perceptions on collaboration across three instructional delivery methods: (a) traditional textbook alone, (b) traditional text with video components, and (c) traditional text, video components, and CD-Rom multiple choices probes. This project, Professional Ready for Educational Partnerships (PREP) was funded through the U.S. Department of Education so that an innovative program in preparing educators to collaborate, using technology elements, could be created and evaluated. On pre/post measure for which an ANCOVA was run, Welch and Brownell reported significance differences between groups on both the cognitive and attitudinal measure with the group using all three components scoring highest. Qualitative measures collected through group interviews on participants’ reactions to instructional components showed high levels of satisfaction with video-based instruction.
Participants watched vignettes on collaboration presented by experts from the field of special education. They reported that the videos allowed them to actually see examples of collaboration and to hear what was happening in classrooms from a reputable source. Welch and Brownell concluded that PREP was, “effective in promoting teacher candidates’ understanding and improving their self confidence regarding working together [with other teachers] to serve students with special needs” (p.142). Furthermore, these authors discussed plans for the future of PREP in an online environment which they felt would maximize the benefit of technology in teacher education.

In the most recent of relevant studies, Gallagher et al. investigated preservice special education’s perceptions of collaboration by conducting a content analysis on participants’ reflective journal assignments. These journals yielded rich information on how preservice teachers viewed their daily classroom collaborative activities. Participants were all graduate level students with varying degrees of teaching experience from currently employed as a classroom teacher to full-time students. Themes distilled from the students’ journals in order of highest frequency to lowest frequency were: (a) self-evaluation of collaboration skills; (b) communication skills; (c) personal evaluation of team function; (d) components of teaming such as, roles and outcomes; (e) conflict; (f) relationships with other professionals; (g) paraeducators; (h) mentoring; (i) logistical issues such as, scheduling and shared planning time; (j) problem solving; and (k) evaluation of the team process. The frequency of self-evaluation corresponds with the nature of the reflective journal assignment in which students are supposed to think about and analyze their experiences with collaboration. The infrequency of logistical issues was interesting due to the literature having named such issues as major roadblocks to successful collaboration. This could mean that collaboration efforts are being prioritized at the school level and therefore these barriers have been removed. The authors note that coursework specific to
collaboration skills should be an integral part of preservice training. They state that, “curriculum in such course should be developed with an awareness of professional attitudes and perceptions about teamwork and collaboration” (p.17). Furthermore, teacher educators in special education can use this knowledge to continue to consider the training needs of their future special educators.

**Coursework through Online Learning Environments**

The proliferation of online learning environments in teacher education programs further complicates the assessment of such training needs. It has created a new frontier in instructional delivery which has little documented “best practices” for preparing educators (Knapczyk, & Hew, 2007). Online learning environments have proven to be as satisfying to students as traditional face-to-face classes (Jordan et al., 2004; Rowley, Dysard, & Arnold, 2005; Singh & Stoloff, 2007) and equally as successful in improving knowledge and skills within the same comparison (Harrell & Harris, 2006; O’Neal, Jones, Miller, Campbell, & Pierce, 2007). The research identified benefits to online learning such as freedom from geographical restrictions, flexibility of learning, a diversified student body, and increased interactions among classmates (Harrell & Harris; Frey, 2004; Jordan et al; O’Neal et al; Olson & Werhan, 2005; Singh & Stoloff). Student identified benefits to online learning included increases in technological skills, timely instructor feedback, and better relationships with peers and instructors, and increased convenience in completing coursework (Frey; Korir Bore, 2008; Singh & Stoloff). Barriers to the online coursework format include differential abilities of students in using technology, high drop out rates, no physical contact with class participants, and lack of technical support (Frey; Leonard & Guha, 2001; Korir Bore; O’Neal et al., Singh & Stoloff). Finally, online coursework has been seen as more demanding for both the students and faculty involved (Singh & Stoloff; Vonderwell & Turner, 2005).
Knapczyk and Hew (2007) investigated how instructional activities aligned to corresponding course objectives in an online course on behavior management. The researchers looked at six activities which included reading material presented in the online modules, posting reactions to content on public discussion boards, working in small groups to create case studies, participating in an asynchronous debate, and conducting an online chat which included other students, an instructor, and a psychiatrist. Data were collected though the use of an assessment rubric which evaluated the student’s attainment of an objective per activity, a questionnaire survey, and open-ended questions. Using a Likert-type scale, participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of the instructional activity and the overall perception of the online learning approach. In addition, participants were asked open-ended questions about the instructional activities, their interaction with classmates, and general thoughts on completing activities online. Findings showed high percentage of participants (91%-100%) met the corresponding objective requirements by completing their activities. Participants rated the discussing of readings through postings, the participating in the online chat, and the researching of content as the most effective activities for teaching them about behavior management. The asynchronous debate was rated the least effective. Participants voiced concerns over learning in an online environment. Technological difficulties during the synchronous chat were highlighted as being problematic. Trying to navigate the structure of an online debate was also reported as difficult for some participants. Participants noted difficulties conducting group work in an online environment such as, timely communication, and division of responsibilities. The authors noted that the activities which used small groups were rated the lowest by the students. They also suggested that the groups which had a student who took on a leadership role performed better on the activities. In order to ameliorate these problems, the roles and responsibilities of the members in online group work may need to be carefully considered. Knapczyk and Hew recommended that instructors for
online courses consider the timing of assignment, allowing sufficient time to interact with others when called for, and to provide clear “parameters of classmate interaction” in order to prevent misunderstandings while communicating online (p. 181). In addition, the authors reiterated the need for continued research on instructional activities in online environments in order to better align activities with learning objectives.

In conclusion, the learning of collaboration skills in special education teacher preparation programs has been firmly situated as a timely and important topic for research. Although much of the literature has focused on the positives and negatives in creating and sustaining collaborative partnerships, little research has explored the way in which learning about collaboration occurs in higher education. Continued improvements in training teachers to work collaboratively with others while serving students with disabilities are needed. As shown in the above review, student perspectives on their own learning and application of skills have been used as valuable data pieces from which to guide instructional reform.

This chapter has reviewed the history of collaboration in special education, the key stakeholders in collaboration, the use of reflective practices in teacher education, and the role of teacher education in promoting collaboration skills among preservice teachers. Collaboration is a cornerstone of best practices in special education; recommended and encouraged in federal legislation and national teacher standards. Collaboration between key stakeholders (i.e. co-teachers and parents) has been thoroughly explored in the literature. We know that these partnerships, though challenging, are essential for providing comprehensive services to students and families. We also know that training, both preservice and inservice, has been recommended in order to fully equip special education teachers for the collaboration skills they will need throughout their career. Teacher education programs, including online programs, have suggested coursework in collaboration as a training tool. Little is known about the implementation and
perceived effectiveness of this tool. My proposed study seeks to fill this gap by providing information on preservice special education teachers’ perceptions of collaboration as a professional practice and on their perceived preparedness to collaborate in future professional settings. These preservice teachers are involved in reflective journal writing during the course in which they are asked to make meaning out of their unique experiences with collaboration in their schools. The following chapter will present the design of my study and my research methods.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to describe preservice special education teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about collaboration as a professional practice. It has been established through national teacher and accreditation standards, through federal policy, and through emphasis from the field of teaching special education that collaboration skills are an important part of teacher training. Preservice teachers most typically receive this training through coursework, collaborative field placements, or a combination of both, if at all. Having the skill base necessary for successful collaboration is thought to support the induction and retention of special education teachers in the field (Billingsley, 2004). However there is scant research on how preservice teachers view their collaboration skills before entering the teaching field in which these skills will need to be applied. Without building this knowledge it continues to be difficult to assess how training at the preservice level influences the preservice teachers’ set of beliefs about collaboration, and influences their performance in collaborative events. The research questions guiding this study are: (a) What are preservice special education teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about collaboration as a professional practice, (b) What challenges do preservice special education teachers report as obstructing collaboration in their school environments, and (c) After completing coursework in collaboration, how prepared to collaborate do these teachers feel? This chapter will be organized in the following manner: the design of the study, context of the study, sample selection, data collection, data analysis, validity and reliability, and researcher bias and assumptions.
Design of the Study

Due to the descriptive nature of the research questions asked, a qualitative case study design was used for this study. According to Patton (2002), “cases are units of analysis” and can consist of, “individuals, groups, neighborhoods, programs, organizations, cultures, regions, or nation-states” (p.447). Within each case study, there can be several layers of units of analysis. For example, for this study the largest unit of analysis is the participants’ school context that they described in their course work. Next, is the unit of the online course itself titled Collaboration among Professionals and Families, and within that unit each participant is treated as a smaller unit of analysis. It is recommended that the “lowest level unit of analysis possible” (Bernard, 1995, as cited by Patton, 2002, p.448) be used when conducting a case study.

Generally, qualitative research is described as naturalistic, inductive, descriptive, contextual, and flexible (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Qualitative studies are naturalistic due to their emphasis on natural settings in which the experience occurs; no attempt to set up experimental conditions would occur. The inductive descriptor defines the process of obtaining knowledge or generating theories in qualitative research; it begins from the bottom up, as opposed to a more deductive or “top down” approach. Bogdan and Biklen stated:

As a qualitative researcher planning to develop some kind of theory about what you have been studying, the direction you travel comes after you have been collecting the data.…

You are not putting together a puzzle whose picture you already know. (p.6)

In other words, “context matters” in qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, p. 53). The specific setting of the phenomenon you study plays a central role in data analysis and guides sampling procedures as well. This particular credo of qualitative research elicits heavy criticism about generalizability of results for such studies. Generalizability, the case study, and qualitative
reasoning, will be discussed later in this chapter under the subsection *Validity and Reliability*. Qualitative studies follow inductive reasoning when making research design decisions by proposing flexible plans for collecting and analyzing data. Again, this directly contrasts with some deductive quantitative procedures for which a spontaneous alteration of the proposed research plan would be considered a weakness in the study’s design or implementation. Flexibility is permissible in both data collection decisions and data analysis decisions as the research unfolds. Requests for other types of data, for example elicited documents or follow-up interviews, may be deemed necessary after data analysis has begun. In Marshall and Rossman’s (2003) *Designing Qualitative Research*, novice researchers, such as myself, are encouraged to plan for flexibility within their research design.

According to qualitative research design guidelines in special education, qualitative inquiry is defined as, “a systematic approach to understanding qualities, or the essential nature, of a phenomenon within a particular context” (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p.196). For this study, the phenomenon in question is preservice teachers’ views of collaboration, and the context is their individual schools and classrooms in which they work, as well as the common context of our online classroom. Brantlinger et al. posit the position that qualitative research can be empirically-based, can generate knowledge production, can provide valid information, and can present results capable of guiding policy and practice. Leaving the methodological underpinnings of my research design choice, I will now provide a brief summary of the context for the case – the online program and the course, Collaboration among Professionals and Families.

*Context of the Study*

Students included in this case study are beginning their second and final year of a distance education certification program delivered through an online learning environment at a large southeastern university. This federally funded grant program for certification in special education
was begun in 2004. The dual purposes of this program are to provide an alternate route to certification through distance education and to meet the needs of local education agencies (LEA) in which many of their teachers were teaching out of field or on provisional certifications. These LEA’s had been identified as having high poverty rates amongst their student population and low retention rates for special educators in their districts. In order to participate in the program, students must be hired as special education paraprofessionals or accepted as school volunteers in identified high need counties while they complete their two years of coursework and practica hours. In exchange for supporting them through the program, these paraprofessionals agree to teach for two years in a high need LEA upon completing their degree. In this way this online special education teacher education program intends to provide highly qualified teachers certified in special education, a nation-wide critical shortage field (Cook & Boe, 2007).

In addition, the program was designed to ameliorate the research to practice gap by including contextually-based assignments with opportunities for reflection by the preservice special education teachers. Participants in the program are exposed to case study learning, anchored instruction via video models, and self-reflective practices with their video-recorded observations, all methods of learning which research has linked to learning in context.

During their program of study, preservice teachers take a total of 70 hours of online coursework and practica. Most students take a full load of classes while working full-time as a paraprofessional. These courses are matched to the coursework provided in traditional format at the home university and subsequently aligned to the professional accreditation standards designated by National Council for Accreditation for Teacher Education (NCATE, 2006) and Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2003). Each semester students complete a practicum of gradually increasing hours and responsibilities which culminates in a semester of full-time
student teaching. Supervision of preservice teachers’ field work by an appointed supervisor takes place in onsite observations (1-2 per semester) and video-recorded observations (2 per semester).

The course, Collaboration among Professionals and Families, is designed to cover the wide array of collaboration which occurs in the school setting. The 13 objectives listed in the course syllabus are aligned with the standards presented in What Every Special Educator should Know and Do (CEC, 2003). The objectives cover: (a) the history and theory behind collaboration, (b) communication skills for working with families and professionals, (c) relationship building with families, (d) ethical practices, (e) team roles and responsibilities in planning an individualized education plan, and (f) collaborative teaching techniques including instructional delivery, planning, and assessment. The course contains 12 modules which include embedded video instruction, quizzes, assignments, rubrics, and synchronous class meetings.

**Participant Selection**

For this case study purposeful sampling was used in order to select both the program from which to gather preservice teachers’ perspectives and the preservice teachers’ themselves. In addition to purposeful sampling the online teaching program and the participants, it needs to be noted that with my close interaction with this setting, I used convenience sampling as well. According to Rossman and Marshall (2003), researchers frequently begin with considering accessible sites when making sampling decision. According to Merriam (1998), “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p.61). My interests in understanding how preservice special education teachers describe their experiences with collaboration while completing coursework and fieldwork led me to this type of sampling.

The preservice special education teachers volunteered to participate for the study by designating one of two levels of participation: (a) participants will volunteer to allow myself and
the primary researcher on the IRB application, Dr. Cynthia Vail, to review the documents they created throughout the course, or (b) participants will agree to both document analysis and an in-depth interview about the course. The only criterion for initial selection was that the participant remains enrolled in the course for the entire semester. Three bids for recruitment were conducted throughout the semester. The first of these bids occurred during the initial synchronous class meeting of the semester. At that time, I read a short passage describing the research, introduced Dr. Cynthia Vail as my college contact person and interviewer, explained the separation of the research from the coursework, and offered to answer any questions the participants may have had. Also, the class members were told that they may withdrawal from the research at any time with no personal or academic consequences. A follow up email bid sent shortly after the initial bid contained the same components as above. Lastly, I conducted a face-to-face recruitment bid during a professional development seminar that these students attended.

For this study 12 participants were recruited; 11 females and 1 male. All 12 participants agreed to participate in submitting their assignments for document analysis, and 5 out of 12 agreed to complete an interview. The gender breakdown reflects the overall breakdown of men (12%) to women (88%) in our distance education undergraduate special education program. Participants’ ages ranged from 24 to 55 years old. Out of 12 participants 9 were 40 years old and older. All of the participants can be considered nontraditional undergraduates according to the guidelines of a special study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2002). According to this study a “nontraditional undergraduate” is a person who does not attend postsecondary school directly after high school; works full-time at least a portion of their time at school; has familial responsibilities such as children or elders, and is over 25 years of age. A nontraditional undergraduate may have all of these characteristics or only one. According to
NCES (2002), “73 percent of all undergraduates were in some way ‘nontraditional’ during the 1999-2000 school year” (para 2).

The participants in this study had professional experiences across all three grade level areas: elementary, middle, and high school. Three participants worked in elementary settings while four worked in middle school, and five participants worked in high school settings. The majority of the participants (7 out of 12) were working in urban school systems while the minority (5 out of 12) worked in rural school systems. This classification was determined based on population according to the 2009 New Georgia Encyclopedia, a state resource web site. Counties were considered rural if they had a population of fewer than 35,000. All other counties were considered urban with 6 out of 12 participants working in three of the most populated counties in Georgia. For each of their practicum placements, participants are required to select the type of classroom setting they are working in: self-contained, resource, co-teaching/collaborative, or full inclusion classroom. Four participants self-reported that they worked in a co-taught/collaborative classroom. Four reported that they were in a resource setting while three designated their classroom as an inclusion class. Only one participant reported their setting as self-contained. Therefore this sample offered a diverse range of educational experiences (e.g. elementary, middle, and high school) in a variety of program settings (e.g. co-taught, resource, self-contained) in diverse school districts across the state of Georgia.

Data Collection

Multiple data collection methods were used in order to thoroughly answer the research questions of this study. They included: documents, interviews, and communication within the course via email or the discussion board. Using multiple methods of collecting data and thus analyzing multiple data sources provided triangulation for this study. Brantlinger et al. (2005) list triangulation as an important credibility measure for qualitative research. According to these
authors, triangulation is the “search for convergence of, or consistency among, evidence from
multiple and varied data sources” of which data triangulation is one type that can be used (p. 201). Marshall and Rossman (2006) extend the benefits of triangulation to include strengthening a study’s generalizability: “Designing a study in which multiple cases, multiple informants, or more than one data-gathering method is used can greatly strengthen the study’s usefulness for other settings” (p. 202). A description of each data collection method: documents, interviews, and online communication, in addition to my rationale in selecting said methods will be detailed below.

Documents

The choice of using document analysis matches the intent of my research questions (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). My effort to better comprehend preservice special education teachers’ attitudes and beliefs about collaboration required looking carefully at how participants complete assignments based on the content and standards of the course in conjunction with their own personal experiences in schools. While confident that these texts yield useful information in answering my questions, I must also keep in mind that textual data may not necessarily constitute “reality” (Silverman, 2000, p. 128). Of particular concern for myself as a researcher is the interplay of my serving as instructor of the course for which these preservice teachers produce these texts. Are they then to be considered extant texts, texts which already exist within the natural setting, due to the structure and guidelines of the constructed course, or elicited texts, texts which the researcher solicits (Charmaz, 2006) since the students are aware that the assignments were indeed created by me, the researcher? Charmaz cautions that each type of text requires careful consideration of contextual placement, such as asking the participants’ purpose for writing the text and the intended audience. I developed two strategies for distancing myself from the creation of the texts: (a) grading rubrics with detailed descriptions of required
components were used for all assignments (see Appendix B), and (b) journals entries were graded by a teaching assistant. In addition, my use of an inductive method of data analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) described at length later in this chapter, which required the cross-checking of analysis between participants and between texts, provided a systematic structure for analysis. With these challenges in mind, I determined document analysis fit within my research design. Documents as data are considered unobtrusive (Marshall & Rossman), easily gathered (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Silverman, 2001) and conducive to simultaneous data collection and analysis (Silverman, 2001).

Documents collected for the study included: reflective journals (5 per participant), team meeting observation assignment, and a parent interview assignment. These assignments were assigned for the same course taught by myself a year ago, but in a traditional face-to-face manner. The reflective journal assignment was described in the class syllabus as follows:

Reflective journals are a critical component of the course as they provide a place to connect our class to your individual daily practice. These journals should focus on collaborations observed or experienced in field placements as well as past experiences. Students should track personal goals in the area of collaboration with progress made over the semester. Journal entries should synthesize your classroom and school experiences with class discussions and readings. Your last entry (5th entry) will serve as an overview of what you have learned over the semester. It should include your principles about working with families (3 principles) and collaborating with other teachers and professionals in your school (3 principles). (See Appendix A)

Only the first journal assignment was guided by topical questions: What does collaboration mean to you? Describe where and with whom you experience collaboration in your life. Is collaboration important to you? Why or why not? The remaining four reflective journals were
open ended; any topic around collaboration was appropriate. The corresponding grading rubric was designed in order to provide an objective structure to a subjective assignment. The three areas of assessment asked for a description of the collaboration, a critique of the collaboration, and connection to course readings.

Next, the team meeting observation assignment was collected for analysis. As shown by the previous chapter’s literature review, functioning as a member of a team meeting is a major part of the role and responsibility of a special education teacher. Directions stated:

Each student will observe one team meeting. This may include student support team (SST), Individualized Education Plan (IEP), Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), Individualized Transition Plan (ITP), or parent-teacher conference. Using direct observation and interview, team functioning will be analyzed and described. Reports should include: (1) a general description of the team (roles, layout, time constraints, etc.), (2) functional analysis (type of team structure, developmental stage, etc.), (3) critique of communication styles observed, and (4) summary of your perception of team functioning based on data collected. The student and their supervising teacher must negotiate team observations. Do not disclose any specific identifying information (such as name or initials) regarding the school, professionals involved or students. (See Appendix A)

Lastly, the preservice special education teachers were assigned a parent interview assignment. The rationale behind this assignment was rooted in the importance of the relationship between special education teachers and parents of children with disabilities. Federal public policy such as IDEA 2004 mandates that parents are included in the decision-making process which occurs at regular intervals for children with disabilities. This assignment was described on the syllabus as:
Students will interview the parent(s) or guardians of a student with a disability. Students are encouraged to interview this parent in person. Also, students are encouraged to interview a parent of a student with whom they are currently working with in their setting. The questions and content of the interview are to be guided by the interview questions provided. Students may pick and choose questions they feel are appropriate to each family/parent. Students need to turn in a 1½-2 page summary of the interview which includes the information they learned and their reactions to the conversation. The submitted report should not be solely a summary of the interview; it should be an analysis including student reaction to issues discussed. (See Appendix A)

*Interviews*

Interviews are, “used to gather descriptive data in the subjects’ own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Looking back at my research questions, it is obvious that without gathering information directly from my participants, in their own words, I would not be able to fully answer those questions. Research interviews are commonly found in qualitative work as a data collection tool (Mason, 2003; Merriam, 1998; Rapley, 2004; Patton, 2002). The proliferation of this method can be traced to the ontological belief that underlies qualitative inquiry: “Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit” (Patton, p. 341). Mason goes on to say that when one decides to use interviews they also present, “an epistemological position which allows that a legitimate or meaningful way to generate data …is to talk interactively with people, to ask them questions, to listen to them, to gain access to their accounts and articulations…” (p.64). Mason cautions that effective researchers pay attention to the context of this data gathering method. The action of sitting down to interview plays a role in the construction of data, that participants are often
speaking of what has happened in the past, and therefore data is “reconstructed” in the interview format (p.65). Using inductive data analysis prevents the researcher from looking at interview data as, “simply excavating facts” (Mason, p.64). Finally, interviews are used when observation of a behavior is not feasible. This is true in this study. It would be impossible to observe the numerous daily collaborative interactions between my participants and members of their schools communities. These interactions would include: phone calls with parents, special education team meetings, planning with teachers, and dozens of other events which fall under collaboration among professionals and families. This would require an ethnographic research design. Even if I observed those events, I would not garner the participants’ perceptions of their collaboration skills or changes which have occurred in those skills through observation alone. Patton summarizes this dilemma and the solution interviewing offers:

The fact is we cannot observe everything. We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. (p.341)

Interviews can vary from unstructured-where the interviewer has a general idea about the information they seek, but largely allow the participant to guide the information telling in a conversational manner, to extremely structured-where a standardized questionnaire guides the entirety of the interview process (Mason; Merriam; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Typically, the qualitative interview rests closer to the unstructured or semi-structured end of this continuum. That’s because qualitative inquiry believes that, “the participant’s perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it (the emic perspective), not as the researcher views it (the etic perspective)” (Marshall & Rossman, p.101).
For the purpose of this study, I used the semi-structured interview. The main rationale for this decision is that I did not conduct the interviews with my participants. Due to my dual role as instructor of the course and researcher about the course, it was advised that a neutral third party conduct the interviews. In essence, it was an answer to the question, “What if your students simply answer in the way that they believe you want them to answer?” This third party, Cindy Vail, was very familiar with the literature base on collaboration from previous research experience as well as previous instructional experience in teaching this course. Therefore tight control over the interview questions asked was critical so that my research questions could be thoroughly explored. According to Patton (2002), this approach ensures, “that each interviewee gets asked the same questions-the same stimuli- in the same order, including standard probes” (p.345). Although standardized in presentation format, it is still considered open-ended because a participant, “supplies his or her own words, thoughts, and insights in answering the questions” (p.346). Patton argues that the benefits of this type of interview procedure include the ability of readers of the research to access the complete interview protocol, minimized variation in interviews, efficient use of time during the interview itself, and ease in data analysis due to the structured format and placement of questions. The semi-structured interview protocol for this study (see Appendix C) consists of questions about participants’ perceptions of collaboration, about their beliefs as to their own self-efficacy in collaboration; and attitudes about their experiences with collaboration now and in the future. In addition, demographic information was gathered at the beginning of the interview. Merriam (1998) suggests that general, descriptive questioning at the beginning of an interview, “lays the foundation for questions that access the interviewee’s perceptions, opinions, values, emotions, and so on” (p.82). Careful consideration was given in the wording and the types of questions when creating the standardized protocol. Cindy Vail and myself reviewed the questionnaire, discussed each question and agreed upon set
probes for particular questions. After the initial interview, we sat down again and made minor adjustments so that my research questions were more fully answered.

Merriam (1998) suggests that there are four types of questions recommended for a qualitative research interview: (a) hypothetical questions, centered around “What If?” types of scenarios; (b) devil’s advocate questions, centered on an opposing view of the situation; (c) ideal position questions, centered around the respondent’s view of an ideal scenario; and (d) interpretive questions, centered around clarifying what a respondent has already said. Each type of question provides different types of answers, and should be used in order to access different kinds of knowledge from the respondent. For the purpose of this study, I included hypothetical, ideal position, and interpretative questions. Merriam recommends devil’s advocate questions when the topic is particularly controversial and the researcher wants to avoid undue embarrassment or discomfort of their participants. This type of question was not warranted for my study.

Due to the participants’ disparate geographical locations across the state, interviews were conducted via the online synchronous classroom meeting space. The participants are familiar with this technology since they have been attending synchronous class meetings for over a year in connection with their coursework. The Horizon Wimba classroom has a function which allows for meetings (audio recording) to be archived and stored within the class. These archives can then be locked by me in order to protect any other student from accessing the interviews. Both interview and interviewee were connected to the Horizon Wimba classroom through the use of their computers and headphones with a built-in microphone. These are technological tools which participants already possessed, so no cost was associated with the interviews. Interviews were then transcribed by me. In order to protect each participant’s confidentiality, a pseudonym was assigned to each interviewee before transcription. Transcripts were made available to the
interviewee for member checking. Member checking, recommended by Brantlinger et al. (2005) as a method for increasing validity in your research findings, is when participants are given the opportunity to review data and request any changes be made. Participants were given the power to reword answers and/or strike information from the transcript.

**Online data**

This study also included online email communication between me, as instructor, and volunteer participants, as well as participants’ communication posted on the public discussion board area of the course. The rationale behind selecting this data source was that students may express challenges, concerns, or opinions via online communication that would not appear in their assignments. Online communication data has been used in many investigative studies of learning in the online environment (Cook-Sather, 2007; Frey, 2008; Merkley et al., 2007; Whipp, 2003). These data were analyzed in the same manner as the documents and interviews. Data analysis is described below.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative research methods include simultaneous data collection and analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Charmaz, 2006, Gbrich, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). By simultaneously engaging in these two actions, the qualitative researcher begins to make any necessary adjustments to data collection. This can entail asking participants for a follow-up interview or eliciting a particular document from a participant. Marshall and Rossman state, “The researcher is guided by initial concepts and developing understandings that she shifts or modifies as she collects and analyzes data. Her overall strategy is closer to the interpretative/subjectivist end of the continuum than the technical/objectivist end” (p.155).

Coding and categorization as an analytic tool began with Glaser and Strauss’ work in the 1960s around grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). In an increasingly positivist climate, Glaser and
Strauss’ methodology of grounded theory, “offered systematic strategies for qualitative research practice” (Charmaz, p.5). The outcome of this method was theory grounded in data, arising from data and not, as was the case in most quantitative studies at the time, arbitrarily applied a priori to data collection. The original steps to accomplishing grounded theory, as interpreted by Charmaz, are as follows: (a) co-occurring collection and analysis of data, (b) creating codes and categories from the data, (c) constantly comparing codes to codes and categories to categories as the analysis continues, (d) developing theory from the bottom up, (e) writing memos or field notes during analysis, (f) using purposeful sampling, and (g) researching related literature after theory has been developed.

According to Marshall and Rossman in their text titled, *Designing Qualitative Research* a researcher must use, “preliminary research questions and the related literature …as guidelines” (p.156). Bogdan and Biklen (2003) give similar advice by urging researchers to use existing literature on their research topic as a way to heighten analysis. As a novice researcher, I choose to use the procedures which have emerged from Glaser and Strauss’ seminal work in grounded theory, but are seen as inductive analytical tools which can be applied across theoretical backgrounds.

For this study, I employed the seven-phased analytic procedures outlined by Marshall & Rossman (2006): “(a) organizing the data; (b) immersion in the data; (c) generating categories and themes; (d) coding the data; (e) offering interpretations through analytic memos; (f) searching for alternative understandings; and (g) writing the report…for presenting the study” (p.156). I argue that step d, coding the data, must be done before step c, generating categories and themes, so that data are not constrained to preconceived thematic interpretation. All steps of the process were aided through the use of ATLAS.ti5, qualitative data analysis software. This software allows for the storage, coding, retrieval, and organizing of textual data. The first two
phases of data analysis are easily described. I cataloged my various pieces of data as I received them on a data inventory log. This log included the participant’s number, the type of data collected, the date the data were analyzed, and a spot for additional comments. At this time, all data pieces were assigned a numeric participant code and label. Each piece was saved in Times Roman font with no other distinguishing features. Next, each piece of data was imported into Atlas.ti5. An initial read-through with no subsequent coding was conducted. After this, the data were read and coded, then read and categorized, and finally, read and compared. Marshall and Rossman state, “reading, rereading, and reading through the data once more force the researcher to become intimately familiar with those data” (p.158).

The next two steps in the analytic process for me were coding the data and creating categories or themes. According to Charmaz (2006), “Coding means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data” (p.43). On each piece of data, I conducted initial coding, during which each line or segment of data were carefully examined and salient in vivo codes, or codes containing verbatim utterances from my participants, were created. This type of coding relies heavily on the words of the participant which forces the researcher to stay close to the data, and suppresses hasty assertions at this early analytic phase. For example, a participant wrote: “My husband and I came into our relationship from vastly different backgrounds, and we each had our own ideas of how children should (and should not) be raised. Collaborating, for us, meant actually sitting down and mindfully talking about decisions that were to be made.” My in vivo coding was, “vastly different backgrounds” and “mindfully talking about decisions.”

Next, I conducted focus coding, during which I used, “more directed, selective, and conceptual,” codes than those developed during initial coding (Charmaz, 2006, p.57). Focus codes are researcher generated labels for the events and responses occurring in the data. These
labels can be thought of as categories, and they begin to show patterns in the data. Let’s take the example above. As I begun to see other descriptions of collaboration around parenting, I used the focus code, “Family example” to label data which described this theme. The individual pieces of data thus were organized and compared to other pieces of data. This focus code, “Family example parent” then became a category for the data set based on how consistently and how deeply it was discussed by my participants. Categories were therefore developed based on Patton’s (2002) “substantive significance” (p.66). This type of significance relies not on statistical measures, but on the strength of the data. Did this theme appear across participants and across pieces of data? How well did this category match previous findings from the literature on collaboration? Did this theme, perhaps, identify a new or disparate finding when compared to previous collaboration studies? In addition, Patton recommends using triangulation, the use of multiple sources of data, in order to justify the consistency and strength of the researcher’s interpretation. Did I see this theme in multiple data sources from the same participant?

After checking for substantive significance, code families or themes were generated. For example, after reviewing all of my categories, I found that “family example” and “collaboration is common” are consistently represented and tied to my participants’ definitions of collaboration. This caused me to create a code family or theme called, “Definitions.” Once I had named this family, I then proceeded to the next phase of inductive analysis- writing analytic memos.

Analytic memo writing is when the researcher describes their thought process as to the way the data are unfolding. I used memo writing as a way to ask questions of my data, to create definitions for my categories, and to aid my interpretation of the data. According to Charmaz (2006), the way in which a researcher changes a focused code into a category happens through memo writing:
First, assess which codes best represent what you see happening in your data. In a memo, raise them to conceptual categories for your developing analytic framework—give them a conceptual definition and analytic treatment in narrative form in your memo. Thus, you go beyond using a code as a descriptive tool to view and synthesize your data. (p.91)

I included a short analytic memo here to better illustrate how they assisted in the analytic process:

Collaboration at home means that daily living depends on using cooperating skills. It means that participants see themselves as experts in coordinating both decision-making and responsibilities with their spouses. Collaborating at home means that students identify actions they take: talking, decision-making, sharing, and compromising when engaging in routine family matters. Do participants use these same verbs or different verbs when describing collaboration in schools? Do they feel collaborating with fellow teachers take the same type of skills or different ones than collaborating at home?

Using these analytic memos, I returned to my research questions for interpretations of my findings so far. “Interpretation,” according to Patton (2202), “means attaching significance to what was found, making sense of the findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions…and otherwise imposing order” (p.480). During this step I also searched for “alternative understandings” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 156). This step requires the researcher to question the categories and patterns that she has developed. I asked myself how the data both explains and fails to explain my guiding research questions and the phenomena of interest to me, preservice special education teachers’ attitudes and beliefs about collaboration in their professional contexts. For example, when considering outcomes of collaboration, my initial analysis included several quotes coded as, “increasing accountability” between teachers. Upon closer scrutiny, I found this pattern was not supported by the data, and the coding was removed.
Brantlinger et al. (2005) describe this process as, “disconfirming evidence- after establishing preliminary themes/categories, the researcher looks for evidence in consistent with these themes (outliers)” (p.201). Disconfirming evidence is listed as a credibility building measure in qualitative research (Brantlinger et al).

By using an inductive seven-phased analytic approach (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) aided by Atlas. Ti, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software, I proceeded to analyze the course documents, interviews, and online communication transcripts in the fashion I described above. My process continued to distill the data into common themes about preservice teacher’s beliefs and attitudes on collaboration after having completed an online course on this topic.

Validity and Reliability

It is not uncommon to hear people ask whether a particular study is a “good” study. “Good,” is of course a relative term open to interpretation, but what people usually mean by that question is whether the study was conducted in a rigorous, systematic, and ethical manner such that the results can be trusted (Merriam, 2002, p.24).

Qualitative research’s trustworthiness has been hotly debated: How can a participant’s account be taken as truth? What objectivity is there in qualitative data analysis? How can you take a contextually-based case study and make generalizations? Qualitative researchers argue that there is no definite, objective truth when looking at human behavior and their interactions with others. Instead, “there are multiple, changing realities and individuals have their own unique constructions of reality” (Merriam, 2002, p.25). Indeed, Silverman (2000) cautions against making false claims for the chosen method:

Both the “in-depth” accounts apparently provided by the “open-ended” interview and the apparently unequivocal measure of retention, attitude, and behavior that we obtain via
laboratory or questionnaire methods have a tenuous basis in what people may be saying and doing in their everyday lives. (pp. 94-5)

In addition to multiple realities, qualitative inquiry presumes that the participants involved are indeed the experts on the phenomena they are experiencing. Purposeful sampling exemplifies this concept. Qualitative researchers defend choosing samples which potentially provide the richest amount of information. I see this as a level of trust that is brought to the field, without which neither rapport nor communication could develop. However the debate continues, qualitative research does provide guidelines on reliable, valid, and ethical procedures for conducting research. A discussion of each type of trustworthiness and how I implemented each follows.

In qualitative research, the reliability of your results should be judged based on how well they are a logical conclusion from the data at hand. Merriam (2002) suggests using four strategies to assure consistent and dependable results: (a) triangulation, (b) peer examination, (c) investigator’s positionality, (d) description of methods. All four of these strategies have been incorporated into this study. Data triangulation was accomplished by examining multiple sources of data: course documents, interviews, and course communication. Peer examination was accomplished through my committee’s careful review of my methods and my results. The next section of this chapter, Researcher Bias and Assumptions, details my assumptions, biases, history, and perspectives on collaboration. This section, unique to the qualitative dissertation, lays bare the researcher’s positionality for all readers to witness. Lastly, my research methods were clearly described, and an “audit trail” of my data analysis techniques (i.e. in vivo coding, focus coding, categories, and memos) is available for review (Merriam, p.27). In summary, I include all four of the recommended strategies for bolstering the trustworthiness of my results.
Establishing internal validity for a qualitative study is answering the question, “How congruent are my interpretations to reality?” Qualitative researchers describe building validity through understanding: “It is important to understand the perspectives of those involved, uncover the complexity if human behavior in context, and present a holistic interpretation of what is happening” (Merriam, 2002, p.25). One goes about establishing internal validity by: (a) using triangulation, (b) performing member checks, (c) presenting investigator positionality up front, (d) conducting lengthy data collection and data analysis phases, and (e) searching for negative cases. I argue that the study I conducted met these qualifications for establishing internal validity. During the interview process, I included interpretative questions which sought to verify that what the participant had said, the researcher had understood correctly (Merriam, 1998). After the interviews were conducted, member checking occurred; my participants or “members” were asked to suggest clarifications and/or changes to the interview transcripts. My data collection and analysis were conducted throughout an academic calendar year. This provided me ample time to focus on my data, create codes and categories, and make constant comparisons between pieces of data and across data sets. Also, spending this amount of time engaged in the study let my participants know that I’m invested in its outcomes. Lastly, I described my steps for data analysis using Marshall and Rossman’s (2006) guidelines. One of the last steps included, “searching for alternate understandings,” involves looking through the data for negative cases (p.162). Marshall and Rossman state, “This entails a search through the data during which the researcher challenges the very understanding he is putting forward, searches for negative instances of the patterns, and incorporates these into larger constructs, as necessary” (p. 162). I incorporated the qualitative research guidelines for internal validity into the design of my study.

Generalizability, called external validity in the positivist tradition, is how your research fits into the wider scope of the world. Traditionally, external validity has been established
through the ability of a random sample to generalize to an overall population. This is accomplished through random sampling, experimental/control designs, and statistical analysis. With purposeful sampling as a main tenant of qualitative research, instantly it becomes impossible to apply this same definition to qualitative studies. The big question remains, “Can qualitative studies generalize?” Merriam (2002) answers affirmatively, but changes for whom the case can generalize. Instead of the general population, a qualitative study can generalize to readers interested in learning more about the topic at hand. For example, my case study on learning collaboration skills in an online environment may generalize to readers interested in online learning, collaboration in schools, and teacher education practices. This readership constitutes a large audience of practitioners in both special education and general education (Mason, Thormann, O’Connell, & Behman, 2004). Collaboration has been identified by both fields as an important and worthwhile area of discourse. In a casual review of the past two years of Teacher Education and Special Education, a journal dedicated to issues in the preparation of special education teachers, out of eight issues there were seven articles devoted to some facet of collaboration. Again, this confirms that my study’s generalizability will be determined by the audience most interested in this topic. Merriam states, “Readers themselves determine the extent to which findings from a study can be applied to their context’ (pp.28-9). The researcher’s role is to promote generalizability by writing up a detailed description in which their readers can make such an application. The readers then determine how much of a study fits, or does not fit, their own experiences. Using each discrete qualitative case as a building block, a substantial body of literature on a topic is constructed. Flyvberg (2006) argues that the very process of learning a skill requires exposures to many discreet cases, such as an intern of medicine grows into a surgeon: “It is only because of the experience with cases that one can at all move from being a beginner to being an expert” (p.222). My goal in conducting this case study is to provide one of
those building blocks for understanding collaboration skills from a preservice teacher’s perspective.

Researcher Bias and Assumptions

I assume that teachers in today’s schools must have collaboration skills. My background of teaching for seven years in an elementary special education classroom and the experiences I had with colleagues and parents has led me to this belief. In my own experience, I had the full range of hardships and joys when working with others in close, professional relationships. There were often times when I wished I had more guidance with these matters.

My bias is that all teachers should be pro-collaboration. I have seen amazing professional growth in teachers who co-taught for several years in supported classrooms. I have also seen students challenge themselves academically and make social gains when allowed to learn in their classroom with the support of a team. However, in my years of teaching and my three years in higher education, I have most often heard negative, disparaging comments about collaboration among professionals and families in schools. Preservice teachers in past classes have commented that they are not exposed to good models of collaboration in their field placements. Teachers complain of having to work with colleagues that treat them disrespectfully. Also, I have heard it said from general educators that the special education teacher contributes little to the class, and does not fulfill their professional responsibilities. This makes me hyper-aware of how vital it is to provide adequate training for future special educators.

I assume that my participants are interested in these relationships at work and have a desire to better understand how they work. I assume that my students willingly discussed negative and positive examples from the course and from their experiences. I assume that they were able to articulate the numerous events from memory which contained collaboration.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present my findings from the multi-source data set which I inductively analyzed as described in Chapter 3. First, I present a brief description of the pieces of data used, the resulting themes and their code categories, and frequencies of the categories in the data. Next, I move on to answer my first two research questions: (a) What are preservice special education teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about collaboration as a professional practice, and (b) What challenges do preservice special education teachers report as obstructing collaboration in their school environments? Lastly, I present the evidence from the data which answers my final research question, (c) After completing coursework in collaboration, how prepared to collaborate do these teachers feel?

The findings I present here came from my careful analysis of two data sources: assignments from the course, and interview transcripts from a subset of the sample. The third data source, e mail communication through the course, did not yield any substantial information to add to this study therefore none of the pieces of data coded were from that source. Though this removes the third piece of data from my triangulated data set, I argue that the separate assignments completed in the course serve as varied pieces of data in which I identified common ideas and experiences. The total documents analyzed were 84 assignments, seven per participant, and were completed over the course of the semester. Secondly, interview transcripts from five participants of interviews varying from 21-46 minutes were analyzed.
After analyzing the data set multiple times, my findings were divided into 60 code categories. These code categories were comprised of a total of 643 direct quotations from my participants’ writings and interviews. Once code categories were determined, I then grouped the codes by overarching theme by using the Family tool in the ATLAS.ti software. Within each family are a set of related code categories. Code categories which were not supported by the data were eliminated from the code families and therefore will not be discussed. This process resulted in six code families: (a) definitions of collaboration, (b) outcomes of collaboration, (c) collaborative behavior between teachers, (d) collaborative behaviors between teachers and parents, (e) challenges to collaboration, and (f) preparedness to collaborate. Table 1 summarizes the six code families and their corresponding code categories and frequencies therein.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Family</th>
<th>Categories Included</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definitions of collaboration</td>
<td>Working together</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blending differences</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family example</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaboration is common</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes of collaboration</td>
<td>Positive outcomes</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student success</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extra attention</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative behavior between teachers</td>
<td>Shared professional responsibility</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Co-teaching models</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher behaviors</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants’ Beliefs about Collaboration

Throughout their assignments, the preservice teachers voiced their beliefs about collaboration—what collaboration is, where it occurs, and what are the outcomes of collaboration in their professional contexts. In order to piece together these participants’ beliefs, I organized their responses into two code families: Defining Collaboration and Outcomes of...
Collaboration. The code family, Defining Collaboration, included these four categories: (a) defining/blending differences, (b) defining/working for a common goal, (c) collaboration is commonplace, and (d) family examples. This code family contained 51 linked quotes. The second code family, Outcomes of Collaboration, included five categories of codes, including the two most salient discussed here: (a) student success, and (b) extra assistance. This code family included 46 coded quotations from the data. Table 1 provides more detailed information about each code family.

Participant Definitions

How someone defines collaboration is indicative of their beliefs about collaboration as a professional skill and their expectations of how collaboration should work. Participants primarily defined collaboration in one of two ways. Collaboration was either described as people coming together to resolve differences, or as people working together towards a common goal. The participants who described collaboration as blending differences expected that people who collaborate will have different ideas and opinions. For example, one participant wrote, “Often times, you will have to bring your different opinions together in order to make a decision about something. Sharing these ideas and coming up with something that works for everyone is a great example of collaboration at work” (Participant 4, RFJ1). A second participant wrote, “Each teacher who sees a particular student may see different facets of his/her personality, different strengths and weaknesses and different ways to reach him or her” (Participant 1, RFJ1). This same participant clearly described how this blending of differences has a very practical purpose for students with disabilities:

Without a group of teachers working as a team, it can be hard to build a cohesive education plan for these students… When they are learning one thing with their reading teacher, something else in the general education classroom and maybe being pulled out
for an ESOL program as well, it can be hard for them to see how the pieces fit together.

(Participant 1, RFJ1)

Another common definition of collaboration offered by my participants was working together for a common goal. Collaboration occurred when people came together with the same ideas and opinions and worked for a common outcome. One participant stated, “To me, collaboration is when two or more people work together towards a common goal, by sharing ideas with each other that could be used to assist them in reaching their particular goal” (Participant 7, RFJ1). Another participant provided a school example to illustrate her definition of collaboration: “I work with several teachers at school to help our students understand concepts being taught and helping student reach their goals. We work as a team to accomplish this” (Participant 6, RFJ1). In contrast with the code category blending differences, these participants’ definitions envisioned collaboration happening when people agree or are on the “same page” with each other about a decision. These definitions did not suggest differences of opinions sorted out by collaboration. In one participant’s journal, she proclaimed that difference of opinion would be detrimental to collaboration: “What bothers me most is when there is conflict between educators and parents over the education of a student. What is worse is when the teachers and parents do not agree on a common goal” (Participant 7, RFJ3)

Collaboration is Commonplace

My participants often used examples from their home life in order to describe their beliefs about collaboration. Collaboration was an activity they conducted on a daily basis with their spouses, children, and friends: “I experience collaboration in all areas of my life. My husband and I collaborate on how to raise our children, manage our finances and plan for our future. We collaborate with our children when family decisions are necessary” (Participant 2,
RFJ1). Collaboration permeated the running of their households, parenting their children, and arranging entertainment in their lives:

My husband and I came into our relationship from vastly different backgrounds, and we each had our own ideas of how children should (and should not) be raised. Collaborating, for us, meant actually sitting down and mindfully talking about decisions that were to be made. (Participant 1, RFJ1)

With collaboration happening at every turn in their lives, my participants often said that collaboration was a commonplace occurrence, perhaps so common as to be indiscernible: “In my view of the definition of collaboration, the experiences with it are so common its hard to pin point examples (Participant 4, RFJ1). Another participant agreed, “Collaboration can happen on so many different levels throughout our lives, without even realizing” (Participant 5, RFJ1). One participant writing at the beginning of the semester felt that collaboration may not warrant an entire course devoted to its successful execution. She said, “Much of the information provided in the readings should be common knowledge and should be provided as common curtesy[sic]” (Participant 7, RFJ2).

To better understand my participants’ beliefs about collaboration I looked at the way they defined collaboration and how they felt it was situated in their lives. Though many participants spoke about collaboration in their professional contexts, I found it interesting that many participants started with their family life as a way to situate collaboration in their mind. They asserted that it was commonplace in their everyday life inclusive of multiple partners. The next section will describe my participants’ beliefs about the outcomes from collaboration.
Outcomes of Collaboration

“When individuals combine their knowledge and expertise, a positive and pleasant learning environment will be created for all to learn and be successful in the school setting.”

(Participant 8, RFJ1)

Student success. According to the preservice special education teachers in my study, collaboration leads to positive outcomes. My participants firmly believed that student success was achieved through collaboration. “The better the collaboration is among its members, the more successful the school district. Furthermore, the students will be more successful” (Participant 7, RFJ5). Another participant stated, “The educators that attended the parent conference had one goal in mind and that was helping this student succeed and get the best education possible” (Participant 11, TMO). Participant 8 further stated, “Collaboration should be a process of giving and taking for a child to learn and succeed academically.” Student success was also considered the outcome of collaborating with parents about their students: “The more a teacher is in communication with parents, the better the chances the student is going to participate in class and complete assignments at home (Participant 3, RFJ2).

Greater academic assistance. Besides student success, participants believed that collaboration meant greater academic assistance for students leading to more appropriate instruction in the classroom. Two teachers could deliver more support and more individualized support to help an individual student in their classroom. One quote which illustrates this said, “More students are reached and given the free appropriate education they deserve. Students that are not reading at grade level or students having a difficult time with the school life are helped” (Participant 9, RFJ1). Another participant wrote, “In a collaboration classroom the students have not one teacher but two teachers to ask for assistance” (Participant 12, RFJ1). Lastly, a final quote from the same participant’s summative reflective journal, written at the end of the course,
summarized her beliefs on the outcome of collaboration: “Families, teachers, and other professionals are in a partnership for the purpose of one thing, which is assisting in the education on the student. I believe the student is the most important person in the equation of collaboration” (Participant 12, RFJ5).

The outcome of collaboration, according to my participants, is increased academic success for students with disabilities. While student success was believed to occur, very few participants reported specific instances in which they traced the act of collaborating to an improvement in student performance. One participant explained how professionals and parents coming together in an IEP meeting resulted in providing the student a new support, squeezing a stress ball, to help the student with anxiety. She goes on to state that this has made a positive impact on the student’s performance. Another participant responded during her interview that in watching co-teachers, the special education teacher’s specialized knowledge of learning styles leads to increase academic performance: “She knows the way to adapt what they are learning to their different learning styles and their class succeeds almost every time they take a test” (Participant 1, Interview).

On the other hand, my participants warned, if collaboration does not occur then students are the ones to suffer. These preservice teachers believe that collaboration should be student-focused and not teacher-focused. This may explain why none of them presented increase professional development or increased job satisfaction as an outcome of collaboration. This outcome has been reported in the collaboration literature and was a part of our course readings. Other ideas suggested by my participants but not heavily represented in the data were that collaboration increased the consideration for a learner’s needs, such as the use of accommodations and modification, and that collaboration made one feel personally satisfied.

The next section continues to build our understanding of preservice special education teachers’
perceptions of collaboration by looking at their reporting of collaborative behaviors in their schools.

Participants’ Perceptions of Collaboration in Their Schools

In order to better understand preservice special education teachers’ perceptions of collaboration, I looked at their responses for descriptions of collaborative behaviors in the school environment. What did they recognize as exemplifying collaboration? What does collaboration look like when people sit down together? This section describes two code families: (a) collaborative behavior between teachers, and (b) collaborative behaviors between teachers and parents (see Table 1). Each section provides information on how these preservice teachers perceive that collaboration should work in the school setting.

Collaborative Behavior between Teachers

The code family Collaborative Behavior between Teachers included 5 categories of codes. They are presented here in order of highest to lowest frequency in the data set: (a) shared professional responsibility, (b) co-teaching models, (c) teacher behaviors, (d) shared planning, and (e) shared resources. A total of 63 quotes were included under this code family. Since the discussion of challenges is a separate research question for this study, only the behaviors which my participants indicated were exemplary of positive examples of collaboration will be discussed in this section. The four categories which yielded the most comprehensive information in answering my research question will be discussed.

Shared professional responsibility. Participants often voiced that teachers and other school professionals who were collaborating did so by sharing professional responsibility. This category included descriptions of teachers making commitments: to jointly educate students, to jointly prepare and present information on students in meetings, and to jointly uphold each teacher’s unique responsibilities for a student. Participant quotes suggested that with shared
professional responsibility students with disabilities belong to both teachers and the most
effective education for all students in the classroom is seriously considered. For example, one
participant when discussing her own performance in the classroom stated, “I work in three
different inclusion classes during the day, and in all three classes there is rarely a time when I
can sit down. Both teachers are constantly helping students” (Participant 4, RFJ4). A second
participant wrote, “You would have a partner to share the responsibility of teaching a class from
preparation of lesson plans to grading research papers to co-teaching” (Participant 12, RFJ1). A
third participant’s journal entry noted shared professional responsibility at work in the
classroom:

One teacher was going over the vocabulary words that were on the board. The other
teacher made sure the students were writing the terms and knew how to pronounce and
define each term. The special education teacher could break the terms down so that the
special needs students could understand the work. The teachers also distributed graphic
organizers to the students that had problems with writing. Both teachers cared about all of
the students. (Participant 8, RFJ1)

Finally a fourth participant discussed a general educator’s nervousness at having students with
disabilities in her classroom. This participant highlights how shared professional responsibility
can lessen apprehension around inclusion of students with disabilities in the general classroom.

This is when the other special education teacher responded by stating that she would
modify the student’s tests and quizzes for her along with reemphasizing main concepts if
needed. The general education teacher saw that she would have support with this student
from both special education teachers. (Participant 6, RFJ3).

Participants also noted that shared professional responsibility was at work when teachers met
informally to problem solve about a student or when they met in a more formal context such as
an IEP meeting. In one participant’s written account of an IEP meeting it stated, “It was clear that each member (at the meeting) was accountable for their role because each member had input that was unique to their experiences with the student” (Participant 4, TMO). Joint responsibility for students was considered a positive representation of collaborative behavior between teachers.

Co-teaching models. Of the categories I used to describe my participants’ perceptions of collaborative behavior between teachers, co-teaching models were often mentioned in their writing and interviews. This frequent reference to co-teaching makes sense as co-teaching and collaboration are often treated synonymously in the special education literature. In addition, the majority of the participants reported that co-teaching was used as the primary instructional delivery model in their settings. The one participant in a self-contained setting referenced that no co-teaching had occurred in her setting. The other participants specifically commented on observing and experiencing five co-teaching models in their professional settings. The most common co-teaching model reported, one teach one assist, was most often associated with challenges in the co-teaching partnership and will therefore be discussed in that section. For positive models, participants reported seeing parallel teaching, where the group of students are split and taught the same content, one teach and one remediate, where one teacher provides main instruction and one provides individualized help, and team teaching, where both teachers are actively teaching and supporting all student throughout the lesson. Participant comments on these co-teaching models included the following quotes:

They seem to have an understanding, and when one teacher covers a certain topic and talks about it, and opens up a class discussion, the other will give examples to the class…. The teaching style flows well and the students seem to enjoy it. It seems like the students understand the material much easier; the two teachers work well together and make co-teaching look easy. (Participant 5, RFJ4)
The special education and regular education teacher are actively involved in the co-teaching model. The two teachers discuss and plan lessons. They decide what strategies to use and who will teach each part of a lesson. Some days involve flip flopping each period on who’s teaching. (Participant 9, RFJ4)

One such good partnership was in a biology classroom; a regular education and special education teacher were working together. The two teachers taught like wrestlers. They worked like a tag team. They each took turns teaching the class. (Participant 8, RFJ1)

Participants also offered their opinions on the co-teaching they have been experiencing at their schools. One stated, “Within the different co-teaching models, I prefer the teaming model because it allows students to see that both teachers have the ability to help all of the students in the room” (Participant 3, RFJ5). Another participant noted, “The special ed [sic] co-teacher and general ed [sic] work very well together in this particular class and have been recognized as role models within our school as a good team” (Participant 5, PI). Finally, one interviewee offered how she determines a good co-teaching partnership in light of the students’ perceptions in the classroom:

When you’re working with a teacher that you work well with, I find that you can complete each other’s sentences. You both have strengths and you both have weaknesses, and being able to pick up on those is what really comes across to the kids as good teaching. (Participant 3, Interview)

*Shared planning and resources.* These two categories were equally represented by the data, and since they were often referred to each other in tandem I combined the discussion of them here. Participants commented on collaborative teaching by describing teachers, including themselves, who share planning and resources in order to educate students to the best of their abilities. Participants wrote of teachers swapping instructional activities, and mapping
curriculum as a collaborative effort. One participant noted that she provided her general education partner materials for a student behavior plan so that the general education teacher may elicit better behavior from a shared student. One participant noted that her being a student while working in the classroom meant that her supervising teacher came to her for ideas during their shared planning. Another participant commented on the outcome of shared planning and resources: “Since the general education and special education teachers plan together on a weekly basis, it eliminates the possibility of the special education teacher feeling like an outsider or intruder in the general ed [sic] teacher’s classroom” (Participant 4, RFJ3).

In summary, the documents and interview transcripts I analyzed showed four dense categories represented in the data. My participants reported that teachers collaborate with other teachers by sharing professional responsibility for students, by co-teaching, and by sharing planning and resources. All of these behaviors highlight teams of teachers working as equal partners in the education of all students. They show their commitment to collaboration by actively teaching, meeting, problem solving, and planning together.

Collaborative Behaviors Between Teachers and Parents

Collaboration in schools often includes students’ parents and families. Teachers, parents, and administrators are required to meet at least annually to discuss the educational and behavioral progress for students with disabilities. This code family contained fewer total quotations than the previous section about teachers by half. This low representation in the data may be due to the role my participants took in their school setting. The participants who had acted as paraprofessionals in their schools for several years reported more contact with parents such as at parent teacher conferences and other meetings than participants who were new to their settings. There were four descriptive categories of teacher and parent behaviors included in this
code family. They are (a) providing information, (b) avoiding confusing language, (c) meeting, and (d) treating with respect. There were a total of 25 quotations in this code family.

Providing information. This set of quotations referenced the teacher’s role as the provider of information to parents. Participants described teachers in their school settings making frequent and consistent contact with parents through email or phone calls. They stressed that contact should be made for positive events such as academic progress as well as negative events such as behavioral difficulties. One participant wrote, “I think it’s really important that we communicate regularly with the parents and that we do communicate the positive things about their student” (Participant 1, Interview). They reported that teachers who were successfully collaborating made sure to prepare parents for upcoming meetings. One participant stated, “This teacher contacts the parents of her students and tells them ahead of time what needs to be discussed. The parents attend all meetings prepared, ready and willing to participate to their fullest abilities” (Participant 7, RFJ2). Participant writings showed that they felt parents were at a great disadvantage for collaborating if parent teacher discussions were not held prior to an IEP meeting.

According to my participants’ writings, a special education teacher may need to provide information, but he/she must also be able to accept information from parents. Many participants wrote about the importance of listening to parents. Participants felt that by providing information to parents and listening to parents’ concerns, a teacher could ensure more collaboration from those parents. In her interview, one participant said, “They can see that we are really trying to help their child succeed….And they say, ‘Oh, we can do that at home.’ I mean, we collaborate” (Participant 6, Interview). Finally, in commenting on her parent interview, one participant wrote, “Teachers need to listen to the parents, work with the parents, and always take the parents’ consideration into effect [sic] when making decisions about their child” (Participant 12, PI).
Avoiding confusing language and meeting. Although avoiding confusing language is a part of providing information, it was interesting to see how specifically this idea was referenced in the data. Participants were clear that when teachers avoided using confusing language such as acronyms and abbreviations, collaborative meetings were more positive for parents. One participant wrote, “Each person used ordinary language that the father could understand. I noticed that every member of the team made an effort to explain test results in lay terms that helped clarify things for the father” (Participant 1, TMO).

In terms of the setting for collaboration with parents, my participants most often cited that a teacher was meeting with a parent or parents. I looked at this component of the collaborative behaviors between teachers and parents to see if participant’s had a picture of where and when collaboration would occur. My participants indicated that most often collaboration with parents would take place in a formal meeting, such as an annual review of an IEP or a parent-teacher conference. There were few references, besides contacting parents, which described parents and teachers collaborating in the classroom setting around instructional material or assignments.

Treating with respect. Participants expressed the idea that parents should be treated in a respectful manner. This idea was most often discussed by my participants as a challenge to collaboration between parents and teachers, and therefore is discussed in the next section. Those who referenced positive examples of teachers collaborating with parents wrote that respectful communication was essential for building a positive partnership. During a parent interview assignment, one participant reported that through frequent communication and jargon free meetings, her parent interviewee became an, “equal partner when it comes to their child’s educational success (Participant 10, PI). Without respectful communication, they felt, collaboration would not occur.
In summary, participant beliefs were explored through their definitions and reporting of expected outcome of collaboration. Next, participants’ perceptions of collaborative behaviors were presented through their representation of positive collaboration between teachers and collaboration between teachers and parents. The next section will present findings relevant to my second research question, what challenges do pre-service teachers report about collaborating in their professional contexts?

Challenges to Collaboration in Schools

The collaborative process in schools between teachers and between teachers and parents has well documented challenges (e.g. Keefe et al., 2004; Laframboise et al., 2004; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Murray, 2004). My research sought to better understand current challenges facing both urban and rural districts in a southeastern state. Throughout their reflective journals, other assignments, and interviews, participants voiced concerns over challenges to the collaborative process. Some challenging situations were witnessed by the participants while other situation directly involved the participant as a collaborator. This code family contained 134 quotations, the highest number of any code family. Increased reference to challenges may be due to assignment guidelines in which participants were ask to think critically about collaboration in their schools. A total of 10 categories were included in this family and are listed here in order to highest to lowest frequency: (a) power, (b) communication, (c) school wide recognition of collaboration, (d) different expectations between school and parents, (e) one teach one assist, (f) time/schedule, (g) parent commitment, and (h) failure to share responsibility (see Table1).

This section will first present the findings pertaining to challenges between teachers and second present the findings pertaining to challenges between teachers and parents.
Challenges to Collaboration between Teachers

Of the code categories listed above, six of the categories were comprised of quotations describing challenges in collaboration between teachers. Participants discussed issues with: (a) power, (b) one teach one assist, (c) school level recognition of collaboration, (d) communication, (e) time/schedule, and (f) failure to share responsibility. Each category of codes and their corresponding quotations will be discussed.

Power. According to Merriam Webster’s Online Dictionary (2009), power means, “possession of control, authority, or influence over others.” In the traditional school culture, teachers may expect their administration to have greater power than themselves. Yet, with increased collaboration in schools and higher percentages of teachers co-teaching, teachers now experience different power dynamics in the classroom. This category of codes describes participants’ reactions to unequal power between teachers. Frequently, participants described co-teaching arrangements where power was a problem. One participant reported on a co-teaching pair she witnessed:

From what I have observed, the general education teacher is the primary teacher, and the co-teacher tries to step in and help explain to the students different ways to measure angles, and chimes in to help answer questions, etc. The general education teacher is obviously bothered and somewhat "put out" by the co-teacher. As a matter of fact, four or five weeks ago, she pulled him aside and told him that he was being much too loud in her classroom. Furthermore, she mentioned to him that he needed to be quiet during her lecture. He was highly offended by her remarks, and went and sat in the back row of the classroom. (Participant 5, RFJ3)
A second participant described similar circumstances between herself and the general education teacher. She wrote that as she helped students with staying on task and completing math problems, the general education teacher tried to exert control over her professional duties:

This must have upset the teacher because she told me to go stand in the corner and not help the students. The teacher was stopping me from doing what I was hired to do. I went to her after class and told her my job was to help students. Her reply was not in her room. (Participant 8, RFJ3).

The ability to share power between teachers was a hallmark of good collaboration according to my participants. Teachers who were not willing to relinquish control were seen as very difficult to collaborate with. One participant noted, “She (the general education teacher) definitely demonstrated it was a big power thing. She didn’t like the fact that I wanted to go in there and teach the class” (Participant 3, Interview). Another participant stated, “I know some teachers don’t even like paraprofessionals or teachers in their room- it’s almost like it’s a power struggle” (Participant 6, Interview). Lastly, a participant offered her opinion on this challenge: “It (co-teaching) is more about a power play and showing who has more control than the other one. Power and control is not why I want to be a teacher” (Participant 11, RFJ4).

One teach one assist. This code category contained quotations describing the co-teaching model of one teach one assist. In this instructional delivery model, one teacher (i.e. general education teacher) provides the majority of instruction while the second teacher (i.e. special education teacher) monitors behavior and attention, and provides help to individual students when necessary. When participants wrote about this model, they most often wrote of the challenges it presented. For example, one participant wrote, “There are other co-teachers that I have observed who…seem to avoid each other—the general ed [sic] teacher does most of the teaching while the co-teacher merely walks around and keeps students on task” (Participant 5,
RFJ4). Another participant stated, “Co-teaching means that two teachers work together as two teachers in one classroom, not a teacher and a secretary” (Participant 4, RFJ5).

Overall my participants expressed dislike for the one teaches one assists model of co-teaching that they both witnessed and participated in at their schools. Some reported that this was the most prominent model at use on their school such as this participant who said, “What they call co-teaching is basically either using the special education teacher as a parapro or using the special education teacher to run from one class to another” (Participant 1, Interview). This leads us to the third area of challenges, school-wide level of recognition of collaboration.

School-wide level of recognition of collaboration. Participants reported that when the larger school community in which they were working, including their administrators, did not fully recognized collaboration as an important process the ability to collaborate was challenged. This challenge included the administration having a narrow view of collaboration, such as accepting the one teach one assist model of co-teaching as the primary model of instructional delivery in co-taught classrooms. Participants commented on this challenge:

At the school I work at I often here [sic] the term inclusion/collaboration but I do not feel that is being done the way I have been taught at UGA and read about in different textbooks and articles. To be quite honest, I am not sure if my school knows exactly how to go about doing inclusion/collaboration classes for Special Education students. (Participant 11, RFJ2).

Due to the fact that we are short staffed, the co-teachers’ schedules are split. They may co-teach three days a week in a class; two days a week in another class within the same department. At our school, they call this collaboration. (Participant 5, RFJ5).

I have been disappointed by the fact that I have not seen the co-teaching model in practice in my county. What this county considers to be co-teaching really just regulates
the special education teacher to the role of assistant to the teacher. I have not seen any shared classrooms. (Participant 1, RFJ4).

When participants commented on positive examples of school-wide recognition of collaboration, they referenced having adequate number of co-teachers, adequate planning time, and some administrative expectation that collaboration will occur. For example, one participant noted, “Our middle school is encouraging and requiring collaboration to occur on a regular basis between subject teams and grade level team members. Each subject team is required to show written documentation that they are sharing their ideas” (Participant 7, RFJ1).

Communication. Of the 25 quotations linked to this code category, the majority concerned challenges when trying to communicate with parents. However, some participants also noted difficulties when communicating with teachers. These challenges were most often seen as one co-teacher being unwilling to communicate with another teacher or with the participant in their role as paraprofessional or student teacher. One participant commented that the poor model of communication that she saw between co-teachers taught her what she would not do when faced with a similar situation. She stated, “The communication between the general education teacher and special education teacher is almost nonexistent….Each teacher is getting upset with the other because they are not keeping each other informed” (Participant 10, RFJ5).

Another participant described lack of communication regarding her own professional placement. She wrote, “If they refuse to communicate with you and tell you what to do or reject everything you suggest…then it is very hard to do your job” (Participant 11, RFJ5). Challenges with communication meant that my participants’ felt less prepared to do their jobs and more like an outsider to their classroom setting. Interestingly, few participants offered solutions to improve communication when they felt ostracized by the general education teacher or other co-teaching professional.
Time/schedule. Although the special education literature has stated that collaboration faces one of its biggest challenges in time and scheduling, my participants did not mention this as major challenge to their collaboration. The few participants that mentioned time and schedule conflicts discussed the difficulties with trying to find planning time or in scheduling meetings with multiple members. Several participants made reference to having to meet after school or before school in order to fit collaborative planning in their schedule. The use of the special education teacher as a helper in several subject areas and several classrooms was also noted as a scheduling challenge. Participants felt that with this harried schedule, collaboration could not take place.

Failure to share responsibility. Just as in the earlier section of this study where participants described positive models of collaboration and included shared professional responsibility as a hallmark of successful collaboration so did these same participants recognize that failure to share professional responsibility is a roadblock to collaboration. This code category contained quotes which describe instances in which participants’ felt general education teachers were not committed to providing an appropriate education for student. For example, one participant noted:

The math teacher did not share the common goal of the rest of the team; to determine what strategies we will use to better serve Skippy in his current placement. The math teacher was on one mission; to have Skippy removed from her inclusion classroom…She was concerned with her performance and the rest of the team was concerned with Skippy’s. (Participant 7, TMO).

Participant quotes revealed that a lack of shared responsibility may be indicative of a general educator’s views on inclusion of students with disabilities. One participant wrote:
While I have seen a few of the general education teachers make an attempt to work with special educators in our school to provide a cohesive educational plan for our students, the majority of them seem to prefer that the general and special education classrooms be kept completely separate. (Participant 1, PI)

While interviewing, this same participant described her experience accompanying students with disabilities into the general education classroom for an “inclusion” class. She stated, “Even though they are supposed to be in inclusion in that classroom they’re still segregated at their own table in a different section in the room. They haven’t had supplies for them” (Participant1, Interview).

This section has explained my participants’ views on challenges to collaboration between teachers. It included the code categories: (a) power, (b) one teach one assist, (c) school-wide recognition of collaboration, (d) communication, (e) time/schedule, and (f) failure to share responsibility. The next section will describe my participant views on challenges to collaboration between parents and teachers.

Challenges to Collaboration between Teachers and Parents

When discussing challenges to collaboration between teachers and parents, my participants described situations in which these four code categories played a prominent role: (a) power, (b) communication, (c) different expectations between teachers and parents, and (d) parent commitment. Each code category and corresponding examples of quotations from each category will be presented.

Power. The code category power was less frequently represented in my participants’ discussion of the challenges between teachers and parents as it was between teachers. Power, or the ability to exert control or authority over others, played a role in conflicts between parents and teachers. In one participant’s description of a situation where a disagreement between a parent
and the teacher led to outside intervention, she reported that the teacher would not change her mind because she was the expert in the group. Another participant noted that equality was not easy to come by for parents. She stated:

Parents often have an insecure feeling of lesser power than the school personnel…. It is difficult for personnel to convince parents of their equality in meetings and equally as difficult for parents to believe they have this equality. After all, most parents believe school personnel run the school, parents don’t. (Participant 2, RFJ2).

A third participant discussed how parents are often presented with a large group of people and a completed IEP when they come to their student’s meeting. This makes parents feel as if all the decisions have been made and works against the collaborative process. One participant suggested, “We have to empower the families to be an actual part of the team and not just a rubber stamp on what we want to do” (Participant 1, RFJ2).

Communication. Participants reflected on the quality and amount of communication between teachers and parents both as a successful practice of collaboration discussed earlier, and here as examples of poor practice of collaboration. Several participant assignments showed that communication was disrupted by the use of educator jargon when meeting with parents. After observing a typical team meeting at her school, one participant remarked, “I don’t think information was explained clearly at all times. Teachers in this meeting communicated by using professional teacher terminology. This can cause confusion and intimidation towards the parent and student” (Participant 9, TMO). Another participant stated:

I would say that the new teacher needs to weigh his/her words and think about what you say to parents. Most parents don’t know the terminology that you will use, so be careful not too use too many of these words. It will intimidate them. (Participant 5, PI)
When school professionals conducted meetings where educational terminology was heavily used, my participants reported a break down in collaboration.

The amount of communication between teachers and parents was also considered a challenge. When teachers did not provide enough information for parents, such as not calling to report a behavior problem or academic problem, parents were left wondering what was going on at school. One participant noted, “That’s the biggest complaint that I hear from parents that teachers don’t keep them on top of what’s going on. There’s a problem at school and the teachers just leave it there and they don’t want to contact parents” (Participant 3, Interview). Notably, participants commented that it was also the parent’s responsibility to sustain communication.

Different expectations. Quotes included in this category described situations in which parents had one idea of the outcome from a meeting or discussion, and the teacher had an opposing idea of the outcome from such meeting. Participants discussed instances where parents demanded specific outcomes to decisions such as appropriate accommodations for a student, or the students’ educational environment and felt that this showed intimidation on the part of the parent. One participant described a high school IEP meeting where parents were pushing to have their student removed from special education classes. The participant, who witnessed the meeting, wrote

Last year he had a Study Skills class, the special ed [sic] lead teacher has emphasized the importance of his having this class this year, but the parents have refused, and say they do not, under any circumstances want him in a Study Skills class. (Participant 5, RFJ2)

Later in the journal she continued, “The entire collaborative team is bending over backwards for this one student, and it seems as if the system is being taken advantage of” (Participant 5, RFJ2). Another participant wrote in her journal that in giving in to parent demands, the team was not collaborating.
Parent commitment. This last category contains participant quotations that mention a lack of parent commitment as a challenge to collaboration. Lack of parent commitment was commented on by participants in all grade level settings (i.e. elementary, middle, high). One participant commented on her experience with parent commitment:

What I mainly see is either parents that are involved with their child’s education and therefore have a strong relationship with their child’s educators or parents that are not involved at all, no matter what efforts the educators make in order to make the parents more a part of their child’s education. (Participant 4, RFJ2).

Another participant concurred when she noted that in her setting, “While many parents remain committed to their child’s education throughout high school, I see many that do not” (Participant 3, RFJ2). Parents that fall in the lack of commitment category appear to be unreachable for collaboration.

In conclusion, the preservice special education teachers who were taking the course “Collaboration among Professionals and Families,” reported numerous challenges to collaboration in their professional settings. Major categories of challenges to collaboration emerged from the data including power dynamics between teachers and between teachers and parents, and including communication breakdowns between these same key players. In addition, challenges unique to teachers were the use of the one teach one assist co-teaching model, and lack of a school-wide recognition of collaboration so that teachers would be supported in their partnership. On the parent side, participants reported that use of educator jargon, infrequent contact, and different expectations for their shared student with disabilities were challenges evident in their professional settings. The following section will answer my third research question, How prepared to collaborate do these teachers feel?
Preparedness

My final research question was concerned with the intersection of training through coursework and my participant’s assessment of their readiness to collaborate in their new professional roles. This code family was comprised of three categories of codes: (a) participant’s belief in their performance, (b) looks critically at collaboration, and (c) coursework reference. There were a total of 63 quotations included in this code family.

Participants’ Belief in their Performance

According to Bandura (1997) self-efficacy is a social cognitive theory which states that a person’s belief in their performance given a certain situation influences their actual performance and ability to attain certain outcomes. These beliefs influence not only a person’s course of actions but also how long they will persevere with a course of action which is riddled with challenges. It is a relationship between belief of performance and attainment of desired outcome. Those who believe they will be successful, are successful; as are they more determined, more resourceful, and less discouraged (Bandura, 1997). For collaboration in particular, my participants’ belief in their collaborative skills helps to situate the learning they did in their coursework and their fieldwork.

In this category quotations from my participant described their personal evaluation of their performance during a collaborative event with a parent or a teacher. The evaluation was most often positive in nature and connected to an experience where the participant was satisfied with the outcome of the collaboration. Ten out of 12 participants noted their beliefs in their performance at least one time throughout their coursework, and several included their beliefs in their ability to collaborate across multiple assignments. Several participants commented on their performance within a formal meeting. For example, one participant wrote, “It was good that I attended this meeting because I played an active role in the decision making process”
(Participant 6, RFJ2). A second participant said, “I was able to be an active participant of this meeting when she (the mother) brought her concern about the lunch line” (Participant 10, RFJ2). A third participant wrote, “I am willing to go that extra mile to make sure that the parents, child, and all involved have an understanding of what our goal is which is helping the child to have a successful transitional period in school” (Participant 8, RFJ2).

Participants also remarked on instances where their actions led to better outcomes. When describing a co-teaching situation in which the participant and the general education teacher were struggling to work together, one participant noted her course of action: “After a couple of days with no improvement, I decided to use the valuable information I learned in my college textbook and put consultation service to work” (Participant 9, RFJ3). This same participant goes on to write that, “having this experience gave me a great deal of confidence in the collaboration process” (Participant 9, RFJ3). One participant noted how her professional experience as a substitute prior to becoming a student teacher effected her collaborative performance, “My most productive days as a substitute have been when I get to collaborate with different teachers, across different grades, and at different schools” (Participant 3, RFJ4). Finally, a participant wrote, “From what I have observed and my personal experience in the co-taught classroom, I have a much better grasp on what it truly means to co-teach and the meaning of collaboration” (Participant 5, RFJ5).

Participants also proclaimed how they expected to behave based on their experiences. These quotes were included because they do contain the participant’s belief in their future performance even if they have not had the opportunity to behave in such a manner so far. One participant stated that in collaborating with parents, “I will not prejudge parents” (Participant 8, RFJ5). A second participant stated, “I will never underestimate the affects of a safe, nurturing learning environment and my commitment to my students’ successes” (Participant 7, RFJ5).
When faced with difficulties between co-teachers, one participant expressed her plan on how to handle it: “I say what I feel and I think that if it was my job to work with a teacher like that, I would definitely approach them and try to plan in advance so that we could come to some type of middle ground” (Participant 3, Interview).

Not all participants’ personal evaluations were positive. After an intensive meeting with parents where the parents and school expectations did not match, one participant felt defeated by the collaboration process: “Looking back at the meeting, I felt as though all of us failed the child. We gave into the parents demands” (Participant 6, RFJ2). A second participant described a situation in which while acting as a paraprofessional in the special education teacher’s classroom, she was subjective to aggressive arguments from the lead teacher in the room. She chronicled a pattern of behavior in which when frustrated the teacher would yell at her and at students. In thinking back on her behavior, she is clearly disappointed in her performance, “I was wrong for not taking the proper steps to confront the conflict occurring in the classroom. I should have demanded respect for myself and the students; instead I engaged in avoidance” (Participant 7, RFJ3).

*Looks Critically at Collaboration.*

Over the course of the semester, my participants were asked to connect their reflective journals and other assignments to the course readings and materials from our class, Collaboration among Professionals and Families. Quotes and references to texts were plentiful in their writing. The quotes coded for this category contained more substantial connections between the course and the participant’s experience. Participants specifically used the course to look critically or to judge their personal experience with collaboration not just make a reference to the text. Only 2 out of 12 participants stated that taking the course allowed them to see how successful collaboration was at their schools. One participant stated, “Before reading Chapter 7, I don’t
think I appreciated what a wonderful job our principal has done in assuring that teachers are able to work together and plan together” (Participant 4, RFJ3).

Instead, the majority of the comments were critically of the collaboration at hand in lieu of what the research says about collaborative relationships. One participant stated, “I have observed some co-teaching in my school and the special education teacher was taking on the role of a teacher’s aide. According to Friend and Cook, co-teaching involves at least two appropriately credentialed professionals” (Participant 8, RFJ4). Another participant commented on the dynamics of a meeting they attended: “There also does not seem to be much collaboration between the members of the teams providing the services to these students. It seems as if each member of the IEP team provides their service in isolation, a practice that Friend and Cook say has been outmoded for the last two decades” (Participant 1, RFJ3). Attending an IEP meeting, a third participant noted, “Unlike Blue-Banning wrote, I feel this parent was not given enough opportunities to be more involved and to be able to express ideas and concerns” (Participant 9, TMO).

Coursework

Although all data were searched for references to what participants felt they had specifically learned from the course, the majority of quotations from this section were from two interview questions: (a) How did the assignments prepare you to collaborate and (b) What skills have you learned through coursework on collaboration?

Participants were fairly positive about all the assignments from the course. There were no negative answers to this question, such as, “The team meeting observation was unhelpful.” Instead, participants tended to clump all the assignments together and call them equally as helpful as another. One participant said, “The reflective journals are important, some people found them annoying, but it really makes you step back and say, ‘What’s going on?’ and reflect
on what really took place” (Participant 2, Interview). The action of reflection throughout the assignment was found useful by some participants by allowing them to see other’s points of view, and to consider collaboration in a more professional manner.

When asked which skills they felt they had learned through the course, the most common answer was about communication. “I think that it’s just that communication is the key. That’s probably the primary thing that I learned,” said one participant (Participant 3, Interview). Another participant stated, “I’ve learned to listen. The biggest part is to listen, and not just to one person, to several people” (Participant 6, Interview). One participant was able to offer some specific skills around communication. She stated that she had learned how to, “ask better questions…. I learned how to approach and how to question differently to see how maybe I can add to the collaboration” (Participant 5, Interview).

This chapter presented findings associated with the three research questions guiding this qualitative case study employing inductive analysis of participants’ assignments and interviews. Findings were organized into major themes: (a) participant beliefs about collaboration, (b) participant perceptions of collaboration in their schools, (c) challenges to collaboration, and (d) preparedness to collaborate. This section began with Table 1 with summarized each code family or theme found in the data, the corresponding categories in each theme, and frequencies of the codes in the data. The next chapter presents my conclusions, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Collaboration skills for new special educators are an important part of their professional practice. Current special education literature, legislation, and teaching standards continue to highlight the necessity of successful collaboration between special educators and partners in their school communities. The inclusion of training in collaborative skills as a part of special education teacher education programs has been strongly recommended (e.g. Arthaud et al., 2007; Austin, 2001; Griffin & Pugach, 2007; Lovingfoss et al., 2001). This case study was designed to look critically at collaboration through the perspective of preservice special education teachers who were engaged in coursework about collaboration. Fundamental questions guiding this study were (a) What are preservice special education teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about collaboration as a professional practice, (b) What challenges do preservice special education teachers report as obstructing collaboration in their school environment, and (c) After completing coursework in collaboration, how prepared to collaborate do these teachers feel? This chapter presents conclusions drawn from findings, implications for practice and future research, and limitations of the study.

Conclusions

Participants of this study believed that collaboration was an important commonly experienced process in which different people came together over a decision or goal. Participants were split as to whether collaboration included disparity of opinions, wherein differences would have to be accommodated among collaborative members, or whether collaboration occurred only when members were on the proverbial “same page.” This distinction becomes interesting when
considering the number of challenges between collaborative members that participants identified. If conflict within collaboration is seen as negating collaborative efforts, then participants are at risk of taking an unrealistic definition of collaboration into the school environment. Friend and Cook’s (2007) text on collaboration, *Interactions: Collaboration Skills for School Professionals*, was used as the primary text for this course, and devotes an entire chapter on conflict while collaborating. The authors warn that “both conflict and resistance are natural occurrences in collaboration, but depending on your response to them, they can either enhance collaboration or impede it” (p.290). Preservice teachers should be presented with realistic models of collaboration in which conflict is handled appropriately and collaborative partners resume working together.

A second strong belief held by my participants is that collaboration between teachers leads to increased student success. It was presented that when a general education teacher and a special education teacher work with students with disabilities more individualized instruction and increased academic support were provided. Although participants’ clearly expressed the belief in collaboration to produce this outcome, they made very few references to specific instances in which a collaborative teaching team made instructional modifications or provided additional assistance to students. More importantly, the evaluation of student success was never mentioned in their writings. In other words, these preservice teachers believe that collaboration produces increased student success but are not reporting evidence that this outcome occurs, or that it is being measured at their schools. Murawaski and Swanson’s (2001) meta-analysis of co-teaching yielded evidence of little effect of co-teaching on student success. With special education demanding evidence-based practices to be used in classrooms, it remains unknown as to whether collaboration between teachers, most often seen as co-teaching, actually increases student achievement. My findings support Zigmond’s (2003) conclusion that co-teaching remains so popular in schools, not because it is the most appropriate model of instruction, but
because it supports the ideology of inclusion. In today’s educational climate of high stakes testing, blanketed support of one program model without proven achievement gains could be as debilitating to students with disabilities as the forced segregation of earlier decades.

Perspectives of collaborative behavior between teachers coincided with Friend and Cooks’ (2007) six defining characteristics of collaboration. Similar to Friend and Cook (2007), my participants saw that collaboration occurred when teachers performed behaviors such as sharing resources and professional responsibility in order to teach all students. However, Friend and Cook’s first tenant of collaboration--collaboration is voluntary--was not identified as part of the collaborative paradigm by my participants. This may be due to the role these preservice teachers played at their school, either acting as paraprofessionals or as student interns, which may not have allowed them access to how collaborative partnerships were chosen. The research has emphasized that voluntary collaboration, particularly with co-teaching, is fundamental to the success of the partnership (Mastropieri et al., 2005; Scruggs et al., 2007). This was not noted in my study.

According to my participants, collaborative behaviors with parents consisted of gathering in formal or informal meetings where it was the special education teacher’s responsibility to convey information to the parents. Providing adequate communication while avoiding educational jargon during conversations was also heralded as quality markers of collaboration. Although the special education literature has emphasized that lack of communication is a barrier to collaboration between teachers and parents (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Friend & Cook, 2007; Muscott et al., 2008), my participants commented on seeing positive examples of communication in their schools.

Challenges to collaboration were the most frequently discussed experience in participant’s assignments and interviews. When discussing the collaboration between teachers,
power, or the lack of it, was on the forefront of my participant’s minds. The inability for two teachers to share space, instructional responsibilities, and curriculum development was seen as being the most detrimental challenge to successful collaboration, and the challenge which most frequently occurred. Teachers, particularly general education, were presented as demanding that special educators assume a submissive or “back seat” role to their own. Difficulties in negotiating power within the co-teaching relationship are well documented (Keefe et al., 2004; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Walsh & Jones, 2004). In addition, my participants saw that the overuse of the one teach/one assist model (often the only model used in their classrooms) of co-teaching perpetuated the power differential between general educators and special educators. Based on their reactions, it may be prudent to remove this model from the co-teaching paradigm, instead focusing on models which by the very nature of the environmental arrangement suggest a more equal power dynamic. For example, in parallel teaching, each teacher takes a heterogeneous group of students and teaches the same content to their group. This requires active teaching and preparation for both co-teachers. The challenges identified when working with parents supported previous research on this collaborative relationship.

Finally, these participants did report that after completing coursework they felt prepared to collaborate and confident in their ability to do so when they will assume the position of a special education teacher. These participant’s self-efficacy beliefs showed that they felt they had the necessary skills to conduct collaborative interactions and that they believed their performance would lead to more successful outcomes for students. Participants noted that reflecting about collaboration resulted in their being more aware of the collaboration around them. Often times this awareness was presented as critical in nature. These findings support that coursework in collaboration does prepare preservice teachers for the collaborative aspects of their profession. Yet, due to these participants providing vague and general answers about the skills they indeed
learned throughout the course, this interpretation should be cautiously adopted. Friend and Cook’s (2007) text presents both overriding constructs such as improved communication as well as specific skills, such as questioning techniques and the use of statements for optimal collaboration in schools. These nuanced skills (i.e. problem solving models, conflict resolution, and meeting agendas) were rarely mentioned by my participants.

**Implications for Practice and Research**

First, teacher education programs in special education should commit to providing training in both the pedagogical knowledge around collaboration and the pedagogical skills necessary to collaborate. The preservice special education teachers in this study reported that collaborative events were pervasive and challenging in their school environments. They demonstrated through their reflective writings that the course content and activities built upon their prior everyday life experiences and beliefs about collaboration. They developed critical consideration of collaboration in addition to models of successful collaboration for future use in the classroom. Certainly these outcomes support the continue use of training in collaboration.

Second, the design of this important training needs to be considered carefully. Recommendations from the literature include a growing research base on collaborative cohorts of general education preservice teachers and special education preservice teachers (Griffin & Pugach, 2007; Ross, Stafford, Church-Pupke, & Bondy, 2006; Smith, Frey, & Tollefson, 2003; Laarhoven et al., 2006; Villa, Thousand, & Chapple, 1996; Wilson Kamen, 2007). These models of training collaboration emphasis collaboration between the student teachers, faculty, and supervising teachers. Laarhoven et al. (2006) used both a shared curriculum as well as shared filed experiences for 84 special education and general education students, and compared their experiences to a control group of student teachers taking course work alone. Longitudinal outcomes favored the group of teachers who had completed field experience and practiced
planning and presenting a co-taught lesson. These teachers reported feeling that the training they received improved their ability to collaborate with other school professionals. Using this type of model for the training of collaboration may promote the learning of the nuanced collaborative skills which my participants were not able to recall after coursework alone. In addition, preservice teachers are provided evaluation on an instructional model that is often ignored in supervisory settings but expected in teaching positions.

Third, the content of the training should be considered. My participants’ overwhelming representation of challenging experiences in collaboration highlights the need for training in collaboration to focus on conflict. Although discussed at length in the text, content knowledge appeared to show no application in their experiences. Power in the classroom between teachers and power in the conference room between teachers and parents was strongly implicated as a barrier to collaboration. Disagreements were seen as detrimental to collaboration, and not as a naturally occurring part of collaborative events. Participants rarely reported constructive conflicts in which, “a problem is solved, when the relationship among those involved is strengthened, and when the people involved increase in their ability to resolve conflicts in the future” (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2004). The reflective practitioner does not simply identify a problem; he/she applies her knowledge and skills to solving the problem. Schon’s work in the development of the reflective practitioner speaks to, “the practical problems that people face in the world, how they learn to resolve them and how to design educational interventions based on these realities” (Cervero, 2001). Conflict resolution remains a practical problem for teacher education to address.

Lastly, content about collaboration in the classroom should emphasize that positive student outcomes should be the result of collaboration between school professionals and between schools and families. That teachers believe that collaboration, and specifically co-teaching, is
beneficial to the students does support inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. More importantly, teachers should be trained on how to document student progress so that the effects of their collaboration are empirically noted. This could be documentation of behavior or academic progress. Models of student progress monitoring emerging from the Response to Intervention initiative could be used as tools to make concrete the effect of teacher behavior on student growth. Activities and assignments should be designed where the types of instructional strategies, adaptations to curriculum, and use of accommodations are paired with consistent data collection. Collaboration skills need to expand to consider the collection and use of data in planning instruction and designing materials by both special educator and general educator, as well as the sharing of this information with parents.

Future research in collaboration should continue to examine correlations between behaviors deemed effective to collaboration, either in the classroom or when meeting with parents, and student outcomes. The emphasis of evidence based practice in special education demands this rigorous look at collaboration, in particular co-teaching. A descriptive case study conducted by Nevin, Cramer, Voigt, and Salazar (2008) examined the instructional modification, adaptations, and accommodation of a co-teaching pair. Using observations, student achievement data, and interviews, these researchers concluded that “overall we found strong evidence of adaptations, accommodations, and strategies specific in the respective lessons occurred on a consistent basis with specific attention to accommodations and adaptations described in the records for students with IEPs” (p.289). In addition, all fourth grade students with disabilities included in the study made adequate developmental progress in reading according to Development Scale Scores on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test. These authors concluded that increased achievement for students in co-taught classes may be due to increased flexibility of student grouping and increased attention to students as opposed to any specialized
instructional strategy applied by the special education teacher. An interesting addition to the previous study would be to use a standardized observation tool designed to capture co-teaching behaviors, and to try and increase the sample size so that reliable correlations could be made. Also more information is needed about co-teaching and student achievement at the secondary level. This research helps to narrow the broad spectrum of collaborative behaviors in order to focus teacher education efforts.

The findings of this study hinted at the link between preservice teachers’ experiences with collaboration and their perceived self efficacy in collaborating. Continuing research in the construct of teacher efficacy could be expanded to include collaborative behaviors and scenarios between teachers and between teachers and parents. Gibson and Dembo (1984) found that teacher’ beliefs in their ability to promote learning in students despite mitigating challenges conformed to Bandura’s (1977) theory of self-efficacy. Teachers who believe they have the skills to promote positive learning experiences structure their classrooms differently than teachers who have low efficacy beliefs (Allinder, 1994: Gibson & Dembo, 1984, 1985) and are less susceptible to teacher burnout (Brouwers & Tomic, 1999). Evidence shows that teachers with high efficacy rates have better performing students (Bandura, 1997). Teacher efficacy has traditionally been examined using rating scales which are concerned with mostly student centered events. Bandura (1997) recommends that “the assessment of teachers’ perceived efficacy should be broadened to gauge its multifaceted nature” (p. 243). New developments in measuring this construct which included statements regarding teachers’ beliefs in their collaborative skills would succeed in diversifying the many roles and responsibilities of a teacher in today’s classroom and provide a more comprehensive view of this social learning construct. The findings presented here could aid in the construction of such a measure.
Limitations

This case study included a small sample of special education preservice teachers completing their coursework on collaboration in an online environment. My use of a convenience sample limits the generalizability of these findings. Generalizability to other preservice teachers and other teacher education programs, whether online or traditional face-to-face format is limited. Instead, this research provides a specific building block to the greater understanding of collaboration as a professional practice of special educators. Case studies can be considered as a whole to develop consistent themes or ideas about a topic (Flyvberg, 2006).

A second limitation is my dual role as both instructor of the course and researcher of this study. Although my students were guaranteed in writing and in person that their responses would in no way affect their performance in the class, my holding this position of power may have caused students to be more guarded and less candid in their responses. Member checking, after the course was completed, was offered to provide students opportunities to change their interview responses if they felt necessary. A certain amount of stress, though not mentioned by my participants, may have been experienced due to my dual role in this situation.

In conclusion, preservice special education teachers who had completed coursework in collaboration verified that collaborative events were an important component of their professional practice. Qualitative inquiry was used to gain a better understanding of this unique case of future teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about collaboration. In addition, participants’ writings and interviews showed that they felt the course, Collaboration among Professionals and Families, was helpful in preparing them for their multifaceted roles as teachers in today’s classrooms. Teacher education programs should look to a collaborative cohort model with emphasis on conflict resolution and student progress monitoring as the next steps in training.
Although limited in its generalization, this case study does provide useful information for both the practice of teacher education and future research.
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*TEACHING Exceptional Children, 39 (3)*, 54-63.


Zigmond, N., (2003). Where should students with disabilities receive special education services?

Course Description
This course reviews is intended to provide a learning context through which students will read, discuss, practice, and reflect on what it means to be a collaborative practitioner in special education. The focus is on partnerships with families as well as other school personnel. This course also provides information that links it to the College of Education’s Conceptual Framework. That is, this course serves to prepare exemplary, reflective practitioners to serve a global community.

Course Objectives
In this class, students will investigate objectives structured by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) as critical content knowledge and skills for teachers. Upon completion of this course, the students will:

1. Examine the historical underpinnings of collaboration in special education based on legislative, philosophical and empirical sources. (CEC GC1.K4, GC1.K6)

2. Describe key components of family systems theory and how it fits with a family-focused approach to collaboration.

3. Explore their own beliefs about families, school personnel and students who come from cultures different from their own and how beliefs impact their practice.

4. Examine factors that promote effective communication and collaboration with individuals, parents, and school and community personnel in a culturally responsive program. (CEC CC7.K1)

5. Discuss typical concerns of parents of individuals with exceptional learning needs and appropriate strategies to collaborate with families regarding their concerns. (CEC CC7.K2, GC7.K2)

6. Explore development of individual student programs working in collaboration with team members. (CEC CC7.K3)

7. Examine the roles of individuals with disabilities, parents, teachers, and other school and community personnel in planning and implementing an individualized program and including transition planning. (CEC CC7.K4, GC5.S6, S7; GC7.K4, K5, S2)

9. Use collaborative strategies in working with individuals with disabilities and parents, and school and community personnel in various learning environments. (CEC CC7.S1)

10. Communicate and consult with individuals, parents, teachers and other school and community personnel. (CEC CC7.S2)

11. Foster respectful and beneficial relationships between families and professionals (CEC CC7.S3)

12. Demonstrate an understanding of the team process and effective communication that facilitate problem solving and means to resolve conflict.

13. Describe various collaborative teaching techniques to support inclusion such as co-teaching, consultation, and peer coaching. (CEC GC1.S1, GC7.K3)

**Required Texts and Materials**


Additional readings will be loaded on each module.

**Course Requirements**

**Quizzes (50 points-10 per quiz):** Students will be assessed on readings via short answer and multiple choice quizzes 6 times throughout the semester. Quizzes will be cumulative and will cover all content up to that time. The lowest quiz grade will be dropped leaving students with 5 quizzes.

**Team observations (20 points):**

Each student will observe one team meetings. These may include SST, IEP, IFSP, ITP, or parent-teacher conferences. Using direct observation and interview, team functioning will be analyzed and described. Reports should include: (1) a general description of the team (roles, layout, time constraints, etc.), (2) functional analysis (type of team structure, developmental stage, etc.), (3) critique of communication styles observed, and (4) summary of your perception of team functioning based on data collected. The student and their supervising teacher must negotiate team observations. Do not disclose any specific identifying information (such as name or initials) regarding the school, professionals involved or students. Reports should be no more than 3 pages, typed, and double-spaced. A grading Rubric is available within the course module.

**Participation (5 points):** All students are expected to participate in Horizon Live Classroom Meetings. These times will be announced ahead of time on the calendar or through Important Announcements. Please check ahead of time that you have the equipment you need and that it is in working order.
**Parent Letter on IEP Process (10 points):**
This assignment provides practice in writing a parent-friendly letter outlining the IEP process which would be sent prior to conducting the meeting. This letter is a potential way to inform parents of what to expect in an IEP meeting thereby increasing team communication during the meeting. The letter should be written in a professional manner keeping the audience in mind. The letter should be free from spelling and grammatical errors.

**Family/Parent Interview (15 points):**
Students will interview the parent(s) or guardians of a student with a disability. Students are encouraged to interview this parent in person. Also, students are encouraged to interview a parent of a student with whom they are currently working with in their setting. The questions and content of the interview are to be guided by the interview questions provided. Students may pick and choose questions they feel are appropriate to each family/parent. Students need to turn in a 1 ½ -2 page summary of the interview which includes the information they learned and their reactions to the conversation. The submitted report should not be solely a summary of the interview; it should be an analysis including student reaction to issues discussed. A grading rubric is included in the course module.
Here are suggested questions. You may add/change them as you deem appropriate to your parent. Please be respectful if a parent does not wish to answer a question.

1. Describe your experience with our school this year. Is this a typical school year for you? Have there been any differences?

2. If you could give advice to a new teacher on the best way to work with parents, what would you tell them?

3. How do you think your experience as a parent of a child with a disability is different from other (Elementary/Middle/Secondary/Pre-K) parents?

4. What do you wish your child's teacher knew about your child?

5. Think about a time when participated in a school meeting such as an IEP or IFSP. How did you feel? What would you have changed about the meeting? What was helpful about the meeting?

**Reflective Journal (25 points: 5 entries required):**
Reflective journals are a critical component of the course as they provide a place to connect our class to your individual daily practice. These journals should focus on collaborations observed or experienced in field placements as well as past experiences. Students should track personal goals in the area of collaboration and progress made over the semester. Journal entries should synthesize your classroom and school experiences with class discussions and readings. Your last entry (5th entry) will serve as an overview of what you have learned over the semester. It should include your principles about working with families (3 principles) and collaborating with other teachers and professionals in your school (3 principles). A grading rubric is provided in the course module. **Journals should be posted under Discussions and your name.**

**Total Potential Points for the course: 125**
Grading Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
<th>Percentage Grade</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>93-100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>90-92.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>87-89.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>83-87.99%</td>
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<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>80-82.99%</td>
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<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>77-79.99%</td>
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<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>70-72.99%</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>60-69.99%</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Below 60%</td>
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Notes

Rules of Assignments
Assignments are due on the assigned due date by 10 pm. Any assignments turned in after the due date will automatically lose 10% of the assigned credit per late day unless the student receives prior approval from the instructor. Additionally, all assignments must fit the following criteria: (1) typed, (2) 12-point Times New Roman font, (3) one-inch margins, (4) APA format, and (5) grammatically correct. All assignments should be emailed to the instructor as a Word attachment unless otherwise noted (such as journals).

Accommodations for Qualified Individuals with Disabilities
It is the policy of The University of Georgia to make reasonable accommodations for qualified individuals with disabilities. If you have a disability and desire accommodations to complete your course requirements, please notify me as soon as possible to discuss your request.

Academic Honesty
All academic work must meet the standards contained in "A Culture of Honesty." Students are responsible for informing themselves about those standards before performing any academic work. The University of Georgia seeks to promote and ensure academic honesty and personal integrity among students and other members of the University community. Academic honesty is defined broadly and simply -- the performance of all academic work without cheating, lying, stealing, or receiving assistance from any other person or using any source of information not appropriately authorized or attributed. All students must comply with an appropriate and sound academic honesty policy and code of honest behavior. All members of the University community are responsible for and involved in bringing about an honest university, and all must work together to ensure the success of the policy and code of behavior. Where suspected violations of the academic honesty policy occur, appropriate procedures are designed to protect the academic process and integrity while ensuring due process. All students are responsible for maintaining the highest standards of honesty and integrity in every phase of their academic careers. The penalties for academic dishonesty are severe and ignorance is not an acceptable defense. I take academic honesty seriously, and plagiarism will not be tolerated. Quality academic writing includes accurate reference to others’ ideas with appropriate acknowledgement. For further Information visit http://www.uga.edu/ovpi/honesty/acadhon.htm. Helpful links to APA citation and academic honesty can also be found at http://www.ctl.uga.edu/teach_asst/academic/index.html
Note
The syllabus is a general plan for the course; deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary. Your online course should always be consulted for final assignments and readings. If you have questions regarding the content presented in class, assigned readings, grades, assignments, etc., please ask prior to any due dates! Every effort will be made to help you understand.
APPENDIX B

GRADING RUBRICS FOR COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

Reflective Journal Assignment: Use the following guidelines when completing these assignments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Required Components</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description of Collaboration</td>
<td>/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thorough description of collaboration- people involved,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>where and when it took place, topics discussed or goal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>for the meeting, decisions made</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critique of the collaboration</td>
<td>/2</td>
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<tr>
<td>What was your role in the collaboration? How does this</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>further your personal goals for collaboration (or not)?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would you change?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to class work, discussion, or readings</td>
<td>/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your journal should connect with class topic in an</td>
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<tr>
<td>obvious way. “This made me think about Lily’s article</td>
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<tr>
<td>and the role of general ed. teachers.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>/5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Team Meeting Observation Assignment: Use the following guidelines when completing this assignment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Required Components:</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Description</td>
<td>/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This section should</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>include the type of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meeting observed,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who attended (position), where &amp; when the meeting takes place, and the goal of the team. (2 point)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional Analysis</td>
<td>/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This section should</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>include a detailed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>description of the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>type of team structure in use. Is the group: forming,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>storming, norming,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>performing, or adjourning (p. 63-64)? What roles (facilitator,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time keeper, recorder, etc) are in place? How are these roles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assigned? How are parents, family members, or students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>involved? (5 points)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Styles</td>
<td>/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This section should</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>describe the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communication that</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>occurs during the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meeting (see Chapter 8). Is communication balanced among the team members? What might be some strategies to ensure all members participate? (5 points)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This section should</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critically address</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the overall functioning of the team. Did the team reach its goal? How were varying opinions addressed? Did a conclusion happen due to consensus or time constraints? What could have been different about the group? (8 points)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>/20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Family/Parent Interview: Use the following guidelines when writing this assignment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Required Components:</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description of the family</td>
<td>/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of family visits</td>
<td>/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection of family visits</td>
<td>/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar, spelling, punctuation, and</td>
<td>/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>technical writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total /15
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Name:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender: M/F</td>
<td>Age:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School District:</td>
<td>School:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade(s) you teach:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long have you worked in the classroom?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To be read by the interviewer: “During your fall semester in SPECTRUM, you completed an online class in collaboration. The following questions will be about your experiences both in the course and in the classroom.”

1. Describe ideal collaboration.
   - Which parts of your “ideal situation” come from your classroom experience?
   - Which part of your “ideal situation” comes from your coursework?
   - When you have ideal collaboration, what happens?

2. Thinking back over the past few months, tell me about a time at your school when you thought collaboration went well.
   - What about with families? Or What about with co-workers?

3. Thinking back over the same time period, tell me about a time when it didn’t go well.
   - What about co-workers? Or What about with families?
4. What collaborative skills might you have applied (or “might have been applied” if not directly involved) that may have helped the situation?

5. In SPED 5400, you were asked to complete several assignments. They included: reflective journals, a team meeting observation, and a parent interview. How did these assignments prepare you to collaborate?

6. Imagine that you are co-teaching with a general education teacher who has very different ideas than you as to how to instruct the class. What would you do? Why do you think you would do this?

7. What skills have you learned through coursework on collaboration?
   - Describe as many experiences as you can in which you have had to use or think about these skills.

8. Next year, when you begin teaching how will you approach collaboration at your school? With co-workers? With families?