ROLE AND POTENTIAL BENEFIT OF TEACHER COLLABORATION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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Master of Arts, 2015

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Abstract

This research examines teacher collaboration in elementary school, its role, and potential benefit. Creating a collaborative educational environment can build a community of people who are working together to achieve the most important goals in their career: increase the students’ and teachers’ performance. Whether educators collaborate with others using the model of team teaching, work conjointly with other individuals, school administration, parents or inspire their students themselves to learn together, collaborative learning opportunities in education can bring lots of positive outcomes and benefits for teachers and students.

In this research, I observed, audiotaped, and interviewed elementary school teachers who work with diverse students. In this study, I strive to show that teacher collaboration is one of the aspects of teachers’ professional development, able to create a safe climate for teachers in which to talk about their individual and professional identity.
Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank Our Lord, who gave me a great opportunity to become a member of the Canadian society, become a student of the University of Toronto and pursue this study.

Second, I feel very grateful to have such a supervisor as Dr. Clive Beck, who has greatly supported me throughout the research process, from the very beginning of developing a research inquiry to finalizing the research project, for his guidance, interest, attention and friendship. Dr. Clive Beck gave me a great chance to study more about teachers’ professional development, and inspire me to conduct a research in this field.

In addition, I would like to thank sincerely Mr. Zyla, the principal of the school, who welcomed me warmly to the school to conduct this study.

Moreover, I would like to express my gratitude to the teachers, who kindly agreed to participate in this research, shared their ideas and feelings, found time for the interviews in their busy schedule.

Finally and especially many thanks to those closest to me – my beloved family in Ukraine and here in Canada for their love and support which has been of great importance and encouragement for me to complete this research project successfully.
Dedication

This research project is dedicated to my beloved mother, who has been giving me support all my life and has taught me to move forward, no matter what happens in life and always achieve the desired goals.
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Chapter One

Introduction

My Path to Becoming a Researcher.

My introduction to the world of research started with my Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees from the University of Cherkassy in Ukraine, which provided me with a strong background in both theoretical (phonetics, phonology, morphology, lexicology, syntax, general and comparative linguistics) and applied linguistics (methodology of foreign language teaching and second language acquisition), as well as sociolinguistics. This has greatly facilitated my academic work at OISE. I have been able to draw connections between the knowledge I had and the knowledge I have acquired Master’s throughout my program here at OISE.

My research interests in curriculum studies and teacher development, second/foreign language education, methodology in second language education, and sociolinguistics derive from my professional experience as an English instructor, my MA program in Curriculum Studies and Teacher Development at OISE/UT, my prior education from Ukraine in English philology, linguistics, and teacher education, and perhaps equally importantly, from my personal experience of being an immigrant to Canada.

My research interests were influenced by Professor Clare Kosnik. Her course on current issues in teacher education gave me an opportunity to learn about challenges Canadian teachers face every day, important issues in the profession of a teacher, and professional development. As a result, my master’s thesis focused on teacher collaboration as one of the important aspects of the professional development of a teacher. In addition to giving me the opportunity to learn about one topic in depth, the research process also helped me to improve my organizational and writing skills, allowed me a glimpse into the world of research, and gave me a sense of the direction I would like my future career as a scholar to take.
My research interests were also influenced by Professor Clive Beck, who gave me an opportunity to learn by participating in his seminars focusing on facilitating reflective professional development and foundations of curriculum studies. I became intrigued by the possibility to learn more about teachers’ professional development; different forms of it; pupil assessment; subject content and pedagogy; and goals, purpose, and vision in teaching.

**Why Did I Decide to Conduct Research in Teacher Collaboration?**

Over the past decade, the debate on school quality has focused increasingly on teachers’ professional development, which has been the subject of much research for a long period of time. The importance of effective professional development has been widely studied by a number of researchers, policy-makers, educators, and educational organizations. With rapid changes in all spheres of social life in every corner of the world, educators face demands for high standards and calls for improvements in teaching, which result in their need to improve their skills and professional development generally. I think it is extremely important to focus on teacher professional development, a key area of which is teacher collaboration.

The findings of my research would be useful for improving professional development opportunities and meaningful for second language education practice. Many teachers in schools experience some sort of professional isolation in a greater or lesser extent. They seek ideas from books, the Internet, a few workshops or conferences, and one or two teachers with whom they share a close relationship. However, with increased pressure for student achievement, educators are struggling in this time to bound system of inadequate professional development. This constitutes the model of professional learning to which most educators are accustomed. Schools become a new center of attention as “collaborative workplaces” and “communities of learners” that motivated teachers and administrators to explore the aspects of professional learning and instructional supervision in the context of the school, as well as promoting an
increased interest on the importance of collaboration as a key aspect of professional development (Robbins & Alvy, 2003).

**Theoretical Framework**

To accept and understand the requirements and standards of the new educational reforms better and deeper, teachers have to learn new concepts of teaching. As a result, teachers need to be provided with extensive learning opportunities that will help them to fit the demands of the rapidly changing world. Based on the research of Villegas-Reimers conducted for UNESCO, the following characteristics are inherent in professional development:

- Constructivism is as a fundamental framework. Due to the reforms that occur in education presently, the term social constructivism is more often used by researchers, educators, and policy makers. Since the 1990s, teacher learning has been conceived of as a constructivism, reframing process in which, through concrete experience, collaborative discourse, and self-reflection, teachers’ knowledge is transformed into new conceptual models while links between the old and the new are created (Zellermayer, 2001). Social constructivism emphasizes education for social transformation and reflects a theory of human development that positions the individual within a socio-cultural context. Beck & Kosnik (2006) approach social constructivism as a way that stimulates all participants of a learning community to be open to the ideas of other members. At the same time, present their ideas forcefully. “It is a passionate approach, involving the whole person: thought, emotion, and action” (p. 8). The person learns from exploring something new, being open to the ideas of others. Learning can be seen as a process of searching for information, exploring it, interpreting it, understanding this information, synthesizing, and, finally, constructing a definition, using and combining knowledge obtained previously. Alesandrini & Larson (2002) illustrate that in the constructivist paradigm, the teacher is not just an educator, who provides his/her learners...
only with structural tasks, but is a facilitator, who helps his/her students to achieve the desired goals, find the ways to problem solving, using their objectives. Back into the history, Piaget, Dewey, and Vygotsky were the founders of social constructivism. This term is widely used in education nowadays and “links to fruitful new strands in sociocultural thought” (Beck & Kosnik, 2006).

- As a lifelong process, which means that teachers have to develop their skills and enhance their performance in order to meet the new standards of the modern system of education. To be a professional in education is not enough to use knowledge once obtained while taking a program at the university or college, as the requirements in education undergo changes along with the shifts in the society in a particular period. In this sense, the process of learning is meaningful, and “relate ideas to the real world to a considerable extent. Only in this way can they participate in constructing their knowledge and acquire the habits that make them lifelong learners” (Beck & Kosnik, 2006, p. 2). Critical and productive inquiry depends on whether the teacher can create and support a culture in the classroom. It may result in “a strong sense of community and much collaborative learning” (Beck & Kosnik, 2006, p. 2).

- As a process that occurs in a distinct context. When professional development opportunities are closely related to teacher’s everyday practice, it is considered to be the most beneficial and productive, as it occurs in the natural environment.

- As a process that directly related to educational reforms. Professional development becomes productive only when it is maintained by external support of different educational organizations. In this regard, school culture is created.

- As an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their practices. When teachers start their careers, they come with prior knowledge they had acquired while taking a program at the university or college. Professional development allows teachers to construct new knowledge in
accordance with the requirements proposed by policy-makers and reformers. In their turn, teachers get an opportunity to reflect on their practices, which helps them to find the issues that are the most challenging for them, and find the adequate solutions of them.

• As professional development that can take different models and approaches. One and the same method or approach of professional development cannot bring fruitful outcomes and be universal for all the participants. It depends on the needs and circumstances of an individual teacher, group of teachers, or a particular school.

• Collaboration is like the fundamental aspect of professional development. Professional development becomes effective only when all the participants of teaching and learning process communicate actively with each other. Cooperative learning and collaboration promote learning and help to reach the desired goals through discussion, reflection, interaction within a group, and other activities. Both cooperative learning and collaboration are considered to be effective educational strategies. They help the participants of the community to perceive the studied object from multiple angles, as well as to hear contrasting points of view, and create own vision (Alesandrini & Larson, 2002). Communication determines the development of a person that occur in the society, which construct and share a cultural meaning and result in acquiring by the individual (Richardson, 1997). The author describes schools as socio-cultural institutions where “teaching and learning take place and where “cultural tools”, such as reading writing, mathematics, and certain models of discourse are utilized” (p. 12). This approach indicates that theory and practice do not develop in isolation, but determined by prevalent cultural supposition, and are interdependent (O’Loughlin, 1995). Social learning theories reflect on how people learn in social contexts and how teachers and educators construct learning communities. A Russian psychologist and teacher, Lev Vygotsky (1962), suggested that individuals learn through
interactions and communications with others. Based on Vygotsky’s research, learning takes place through the interactions students have with their peers and teachers. Following the principles of constructivism, teachers can create an environment in which students interact with each other through discussion, collaboration, and reflection. The social interactions both construct and change knowledge (Bakhtin, 1986; Vygotsky, 1962). Collaborative learning requires learners to develop teamwork skills and to see individual learning as mainly related to the group learning. Studies of how teacher collaboration influences the development of individual teachers as they implement change suggest that an interaction between teachers is also primary in facilitating the change process (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Miller, 1990).

Fullan (1991) suggests “there is no getting around the primacy of personal contact. Teachers need to participate in skill-training workshops, but they also need to have one-to-one and group opportunities to receive and give help, and more simply to converse about the meaning of change” (p.132). The researcher states that the change is facilitated while interaction occurs between educators. The process of collaboration promotes teachers’ ability to analyze and improve classroom practice and results in job satisfaction. While working together, teachers can observe their colleagues; to share their ideas; to interact with each other; to reflect on their practices and experiences; to give and get a feedback as well as a valuable advice; to glean meaningful information, and further implement it in their own practices; to feel themselves significant and irreplaceable members of communities as well as being helpful to each other. Teacher collaboration is a rather complicated process when beliefs and expectations can be reshaped and affected by many factors. Successful collaboration requires trustful relationship between participants, reflection on their practices that will occur regularly, openness to new concepts and requirements in education, readiness to change for the sake of the positive
outcomes of their learners, ability to fit the needs of constantly changing world as well as being ready to unexpected situations that might occur, and the ability to understand, accept, and correct possible mistakes. Teacher collaboration deserves a more significant and prominent place in teacher education though it is only a small component of teacher professional development.

Overview of the Research

The purpose of this study was to show that teacher collaboration is an important aspect of teachers’ professional development. It is crucial for professional skills development, performance improvement, and, as a result, enhanced student achievement and teacher’s job satisfaction. The research aimed at investigating how collaboration can build a trustful relationship between teachers by allowing them to find something unique about their practices and experiences, and to see what teachers might have in common. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to add to the existing research the importance of undertaking professional development activities across the whole teacher’s career cycle, collaboration in particular, in order to develop and maintain professional skills as well as to anticipate any changes and shifts that occur in education of the constantly changing world, by uncovering the most important issues that teachers meet in their practices and experiences. The research was not aimed to argue that collaboration is a solution to all the challenges educators have to face in their practices but to draw attention to the fact that it is considered to be the most convenient and beneficial aspect of teacher professional development among other opportunities. It was not aimed to diminish the importance of other learning opportunities for teachers, but to show a meaningful role and potential benefit of collaboration in teaching and learning relationship.

This thesis deals with certified elementary school teachers in the Province of Ontario, who currently are teaching in one of the schools in the city of Toronto. A purposeful group of 4
Teachers had been chosen, attempting to provide a reasonable sample of school content, teaching areas, gender, and racial background.

The research focuses on one of the aspects of teachers’ professional development, i.e. teacher collaboration. Specifically, this study of teacher collaboration aims at answering the following questions:

Question 1: What are the goals and benefits of teacher collaboration?

Question 2: What are the most used models of teacher collaboration?

Question 3: Is there a link between collaboration and student achievement?

Question 4: What school conditions support or hinder teacher collaboration?

Interviews, audiotapes and field notes were used as the main methods to collect the data. Also, data were collected from informal discussions with school teachers. Data consisted of: (1) Audio-taped discussions; (2) Written responses to a list of interview questions; (3) Audio-taped and transcribed formal interviews with the teachers; (6) Field notes on informal conversations with the teachers.

Significance of the Study

The importance of this study lies in the following aspects. First of all, the aim of this study is to emphasize the importance of collaboration among teachers, as it is an important and decisive element in teacher’s career. Many teachers feel themselves more comfortable discussing the issues they have in their practices with their colleagues in informal environment. It helps them to be more open for an honest discussion, and results in the future improved performance and moral satisfaction with a chosen profession. To be a teacher of the 21st century and meet all the requirements of the modern society, work with the students of different backgrounds, require not only a particular set of knowledge and skills, but a continuous professional development, and be ready to anticipate any changes that might occur in education.
The educators need to improve their skills and subject knowledge, because of the educational reforms and policies introduced by the Ministry of Education. This research was conducted in the elementary school, where mostly students with Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish backgrounds study. The students come to Canada with the limited vocabulary of English, and they cannot count on their parents’ support because either they do not speak English or in the process of mastering the language. The teachers appear in the situation when it is hard to find the unique model of teaching, which can fit all the students and be beneficial for teachers and their students. Second, as teachers play an important and active role in reform, it is necessary to study deeper what aspects of professional development work better for them, what is needed to promote in schools for improving teachers’ performance and developing their professional skills, which will produce students’ positive results. This research tries to contribute the importance of teacher collaboration, its role, and potential benefit.

**Layout of the Thesis**

The thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter One stages and introduces the research. Chapter Two provides a Literature Review of the existing research and findings of teacher professional development, benefits and disadvantages of formal and informal professional development, collaboration as one the aspects of professional development. It describes possible issues to pursue the research and maintains the significance of the current research. Chapter Three describes research methods: the location of the research; the participants and data, its collection and analysis. Chapter Four details with the findings of the current research and includes the analysis. Chapter Five provides the researcher’s interpretation and reflection on the findings and explores the implications for the role and benefits of teacher collaboration in elementary school and makes further recommendations for new research.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

The supporting framework for this research was created through a review of recent studies from the following fields:

1. Theoretical Aspects of Teachers Professional Development
   • Formal Professional Development for Teachers
   • Informal Professional Development for Teachers

2. Collaboration As the Key Aspect of Teachers Professional Development
   • What Collaboration Is
   • Characteristics of Successful Collaboration
   • The Benefits of Collaboration for Teachers and Students

Theoretical Aspects of Teacher Professional Development

Educational reform in Canada sets goals not only for students, but for teachers as well. It is hard to find a unique, perfect approach to effective teacher professional development. Teacher professional development is affected by many factors. Guskey, (2003, p.47) thinks that differences in communities of school administrators, teachers, and students affect career development processes in their way, and can have an enormous impact on the characteristics that play a crucial role in professional development’s effectiveness. In this regard, Diaz-Maggioli (2004) suggests that it is necessary to reshape professional development opportunities, so that mutual work of teachers, students, and administrators result in increased learning for all the participants of the teaching community.

Recent studies, conducted by the researchers throughout the world, indicate that teachers’ knowledge and ability to teach according to the standards have to be updated. One of the most
important factors influencing student learning and success is how teachers are prepared and ready to accept the new demands and standards of the changing world. As a result, teachers have to be provided with different kinds of support to improve and raise their professional status, enhance their instruction, and relevantly impact their students’ development in more powerful ways. Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman and Yoon (2001) in their study suggest the following qualities of professional development that increase teacher performance. The authors believe that ongoing teacher networks and study groups are more efficient rather than regular workshops and conferences. Goals, various activities, materials, and policies have first to be introduced to the teachers, and, then, if they coincide, have to be implemented and become a significant part of professional development. When the members of any study group or network explore the same subject, teach the same grade, they share the same interests and goals, which result in a successful collaborative process, and, furthermore, stimulate the participants to work cooperatively and achieve new heights in teaching performance.

Recent research on the studied topic suggest that teacher professional development performed collaboratively and “grounded in “ the work teachers do” is an effective forum for challenging existing beliefs about content, learners, and teaching, and for using data and research to reflect on, and possible change, instructional practice” (Borko, 2004; Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth, 2001; Little, 2003 as cited in Kennedy, 2009). The shifts in educational reforms motivate teachers to focus not only on knowledge of subject matter and technical aspects, but stimulate them to be active participants in professional development activities. Schools have to be transformed into professional learning communities, which facilitate individual teachers to work and develop their skills together creating professional learning groups (practices that support teacher development). Literature on the topic suggests that teachers learn faster when are actively engaged in learning activities. It is beneficial both for
beginning and experienced teachers when they become active participants in the same learning group. Beginning teachers can make a living stream in practices, providing experienced teachers with new and fresh ideas, while experienced teachers can share their skills and reflect on their prior experiences and practices in terms what works best, and what does not.

Slavit & Holmlund Nelson (2009) indicate that teachers need an immeasurable amount of support in performing professional development, and it is rather problematic to identify the nature of these supports, moreover, there some constraints exist in providing such supports. In this way, district boards of education, different educational and research institutions can support teacher’s desire to organize professional development groups, and help to reorient professional goals of teachers for professional development to become successful. The researchers think that changes in the structure and the culture of the classroom, or school, in general, will not be enough in achieving the desired goals. The goals will be achieved only when teachers, administrators, policy makers work together, cooperate, think the same way, and, which out of most importance, be more attentive to ideas proposed by both sides.

In accordance with the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future’s (2003), “strong professional development opportunities must be embedded in the very fabric of public education” (p.129). Professional learning, being an integral part of the professional development, is described by many researchers in the literature as “a long-term process, extending from teacher education to university to in-service training at the workplace” (Putnam & Borko, 2000, Ball & Cohen, 1999). Huberman (1989a) suggests that the teaching career can be divided into uninterrupted stages with various suggestions in professional development. Grangeat and Gray (2007) argue that beginning teachers give preference to informal meetings with their colleagues and classroom observation in order to improve and maintain their teaching performance, when teachers with some experience find formal meetings more useful for
developing and enhancing their professional skills. Taking into account the above is necessary to mention that teachers use different learning tools during the career cycle. Professional development became an essential component of all the modern projects and programs in order to improve education and achieve higher results. To achieve the maximum effect and success, the organization of teacher professional development has to be of the highest quality, and meet teacher’s needs.

Speck & Knipe (2001) position teacher professional development as a “collaborative learning process that lasts during their work cycle, and helps to maintain professional growth of educators both as individuals and as team members in order to improve and develop their skills and abilities” (p.4). Effective teacher professional development begins with understanding of teachers’ needs and their work environment—schools and classrooms. Teacher professional development is a combination of various techniques that promotes learning; supports teachers in their needs; involves school leadership and makes use of evaluation to increase its impact. Essential techniques include mentoring, teamwork, observation, reflection and assessment. Moreover, to maintain the standards of excellent performance, teachers have to be engaged on a regular basis in the process of permanent learning and perfection across their career cycle. Day (1999) describes teacher professional development as a combination of teacher’s prior experiences and future activities which will be beneficial for and individual teacher, a group, or the whole school, determining the quality of performance both of a teacher and a student. Professional development is a natural process that occur throughout teacher’s career cycle. It allows teachers to “review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purposes of teaching, and by which they acquire and develop the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice with children, young people and colleagues throughout each phase of their teaching live” (p.4).
Successful professional development needs to be explored more profoundly by the policymakers, educators for “its simplicity of a concept and its complexity of implementation” (Speck M. & Knipe C., 2001, p.5). Recent shifts in educational reform have emphasized the importance of teacher professional development and continuing education, and it is widely accepted that teacher development does not occur from time to time but has to be on a regular basis during teacher’s career cycle (McIntyre & Bird, 1998). The use of technology for teaching and learning purposes, a shift in pedagogical models toward constructivism, systematization of critical thinking that is related to lifelong teacher development are the crucial factors that focus interest on teacher professional development (Means, 1994; Sparks & Hirsh, 1997). Vrasidas & Glass (2004) in their research argue that professional development is of great importance for teachers supplying them with an opportunity to expand their knowledge and skills for their learners be successful and, eventually, get the positive outcome.

Blandford (2000) positions professional development as “the acquisition or extension of the knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities” (p.5). All these factors are crucial both for teachers and educational organizations for

- developing and reshaping teacher’s practice;
- reflecting on their practices and prior experiences in order to improve students’ achievement as well as meet their needs;
- bringing practical ideas in the professional life of the teachers;
- interacting as a researcher and practitioner in the school and different educational establishments;
- being aware of current innovations in the sphere of education in order to make teaching practice more advanced and meet the requirements of the new standards in education;
- helping policy-makers to understand the objective problems teachers meet in their everyday
practice in order to maintain standards;
• helping to open the mind in the field of information and communication technology.

Fullan (1991) suggests that professional development is “the sum of formal and informal learning experiences throughout one’s career” (p.326). Craft (2000) tends to think that professional development, continuing professional development (CPD) and in-service training (INSET) are terms that mostly have similar meaning. These terms were created for presenting various educational activities in order to make a contribution to the process of teacher learning, who have moved from educational institutions to active practice. The terms “professional development” and “continuing professional development” are widely used to describe how teachers extend their knowledge, and develop their skills, as well as to cover the opportunities teachers use for their professional learning since the moment they entered schools, and become teachers. Diaz-Maggioli (2004) defines professional development “as a career-long process in which educators fine-tune their teaching to meet student needs” (p.5). As such, it has a direct impact on students’ learning through the decisions teachers take, as these decisions determine teacher’s way of teaching.

Craft (2000) describes certain reasons why teachers have to be involved in any form of professional development. The possible reasons are the following:
• skills improvement and their further development of the whole group of teachers;
• skills improvement and their further development of a particular teacher;
• increasing the level of experience of a particular teacher for his/her career development, or a purpose promotion;
• maturation of the professional knowledge of a teacher and distinguishing teacher’s vision of a profession;
• advancing the level of teacher’s education and preparation;
• giving teachers a sense of being valued;
• promoting a state of comfort from teaching;
• making teachers feel the depth of the chosen profession, and embellished view of it;
• helping teachers to accept the changes that occur in education;
• clarification and discussion of the new policies.

Literature suggests that some professional development experiences and practices which teachers use to improve their performance are meaningful and wasteful in most of the cases (Guskey, 2000). Mostly, professional development experiences and practices have no structure and no evident support. On one hand, some professional development experiences demonstrate ideas that seem to be helpful, but, on the other hand, they are useless when implemented in practice. The reasons for them to impractical are the following, either the resources are incomplete or they have no structural support. But, it has to be mentioned about the coexisting of highly beneficial and prominent professional development activities that can have a significant impact on skills development and teacher’s performance, which will, eventually, result in students’ positive outcomes and teacher’s job satisfaction. Friend & Cook (1990) in their research outline that more considerable attention should be devoted when planning collaborative activities for teachers. These activities should have the maximum connection to real practice of a teacher, and match “expectations for reform with implementation opportunities and constraints” (p. 69). The researchers also draw attention to the fact that knowledge obtained from collaboration, derived from literature resources in order to improve teachers’ practice and education, in general, determines evident conditions for collaboration to be fruitful.

Despite the fact that pre-service training covers most areas of teacher preparation, teachers cannot be prepared for all the challenges they might face during their practice, due to educational reforms that occur in the system. Based on the review of Organization for Economic
Co-operation and Development (2005), effective professional development is considered to be “on-going, includes training, practice, and feedback, and provides adequate time and follow-up support” (p.49). Learning programs to be successful are expected to be created in the way comparable to those, teachers could use in their practice. Schools as learning institutions attract increasing attention and grow interest of policy-makers, researchers, different educational organizations, as the participants of the learning communities, that exist in the schools, have an opportunity to reflect on their practice, share their ideas, beliefs, fears and suggestions in order to organize professional development in the way that could be beneficial for all the participants of the learning process. We can say that professional development is a learning process for all the participants, as it reminds of an ecosystem, where every single piece depends on each other.

In our case, teachers, while undertaking professional development activities, learn from their colleagues, as well as from their students, observing and teaching them, and making certain conclusions as for their level of their performance as educators. In their turn, policy-makers and educational organizations studying teacher’s experiences and practices, try to create and support the perfect model of professional development. Professional development is a complex process, as it requires teacher’s efforts, time, desire, motivation, and support in order to increase the level of his/her performance. The escalation of the level of teacher performance depends on some factors, such as teacher’s engagement in different kinds of learning activities at a workplace. Teacher excellence, professionalism, and student achievement are the key issues in education that depend on each other, and cannot exist on their own (Darling-Hammond, 2004). In order to reach the most important goal in professional development, such as excellent teacher performance, and, as a result student’s positive outcome, it has to be brought to attention of educators to “ provide professional learning opportunities for teachers that build their capacity to teach in ways that are congruent with contemporary understandings about learning, use
sophisticated assessments to inform teaching, and meet different needs” (Darling-Hammond, 2004, p.1081). Hill (2007) assumes that professional development occupies a great part in a teacher career, and helps to increase teacher’s knowledge, performance, and determines student achievement. To prepare high-quality teachers, much effort should be taken in promoting learning throughout a career cycle among teachers with different experiences and time of being engaged in teaching. Future teachers do not have much time and opportunities to learn everything while studying in a higher educational establishment, due to some factors. The factors, such as shifts in the life of a modern society, demands of the modern world, new educational policies, implementation of new technologies in schools, etc. are the issues that cannot be covered by the preparation program. Eventually, teachers will face these questions in their practices. That is why, researchers, policy-makers, educators insist on the importance of a lifelong learning for teachers in order to gain success in their careers, as well as meet the requirements of the changing world (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

The OECD’s The Teaching and Learning International Survey (1998) defines the number of objective reasons when professional development can have a place. The reasons are listed lower:

- in order to update teacher’s knowledge in a particular area
- in order to update teacher’s skills, methods of teaching, because of the implementation of modern technologies in school practice
- to facilitate teachers to accept the shifts in school curricula, and further implement them in their practice
- to facilitate teachers to promote new strategies applied to a school curriculum in their practice
- to facilitate teachers to share their teaching techniques with the colleagues not only within
the community they belong to, but establish friendly collaborative relationship with the colleagues from other schools for further exchange of their experiences, and, finally,

- support inexperienced teachers to achieve the level of performance of more advanced ones.

Prior to discussing learning opportunities, teachers undertake to improve and maintain their professional skills; the term “professional development” has to be determined. In our study, we define “professional development” as formal and informal opportunities that enlarge and enrich teachers’ professional competence, such as knowledge, motivation, expectations, expertise, and determine style of teaching (Baumert & Kunter, 2006). A broader definition of professional development was proposed by OECD’s The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS). It is defined as “activities that develop an individual’s skills, knowledge, expertise and other characteristics as a teacher” (OECD, 2009, p.49). Literature on this subject recognizes that professional development can vary from “formal to informal learning opportunities” (Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Ludtke and Baumert, 2014), depending on what a teacher or a group of teachers finds more advantageous and beneficial for their practice as well as students’ needs. Professional development can be defined as “formal learning opportunities” (Parise, Spillane, 2010, Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Ludtke & Baumert, 2014) and “informal learning opportunities” (Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Ludtke & Baumert, 2014) that help teachers to increase and expand the level of their professionalism, which comprises teacher’s knowledge, motivation, expectations and professional skills (Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Ludtke and Baumert, 2014).

**Formal Professional Development for Teachers**

Desimone (2009) determines the differences between formal professional development and informal professional development. Formal development can be described as a structured, well-organized and purposeful form of professional development. Formal learning opportunities
are usually appointed by educational institutions and organizations, and occur on a regular basis, usually guided by the curriculum in order to improve teacher’s performance (OECD, 2007). Parise & Spillane (2010) use the term “on-the-job learning opportunities” (p. 324), which refers to “formal learning opportunities” (Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Ludtke and Baumert, 2014, p. 96), and describe it as “interactions with colleagues around teaching and learning, including conversations about instruction, peer observation and feedback, and advice seeking about instruction” (p.324).

Being the center of attention among policy-makers and educators, the problem of raising the standards of education, improving teacher performance, getting student’s positive outcome takes on new meaning. Borko (2004) outlines in the research that to create a high-quality teacher and observe student achievement, a teacher must take an active part in formal learning activities. That is maintained and is one of the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). As described in the literature, professional development can take variable forms, such as collective or individual development, continuing education, pre-service and in-service education, group work, team curriculum development, peer collaboration and peer support (Desimone, Porter, Garet et al., 2002; Garet et al., 2001; Hill, 2007; Blandford, 2000). The researchers suggest that there are different activities that take form of formal learning opportunities, among which are workshops, special courses, graduate coursework, AQs, in-school professional development, school district professional development, professional learning communities, formal mentoring, coaching, and in-service days or conferences devoted to increase teacher’s performance. Such types of formal learning activities take place at school at appointed time, and specially trained individuals conduct training and coaching among teachers. Despite the variety of formal learning activities for teachers, the desired result, such as well-prepared teacher and positive student outcome, is not always achieved. The research indicates that such a form of professional
development does not boost change in teacher practice, as a result, has no positive impact on students` achievement (Parise & Spillane, 2010). In order to make professional learning opportunities successful and interesting, all the key components have to be taken into an account when creating an ideal model of professional development, no matter what form it might take. Moreover, policy-makers and educators, who work on creating an ideal model of professional development, have to establish relationship with the teachers, listen to their ideas, beliefs, expectations, what works and what does not, in other words, use previous practices and experiences in order to achieve the desired goal (Speck & Knipe, 2001). The intensity of professional development can be determined by the categories of the activities teachers participate in. In most cases, the combination of formal and informal developmental opportunities, can lead to the achievement of the desired goal. In terms of the above mentioned, the goal is the improved teacher’s performance and emanating from this, positive student’s outcome.

**Informal Professional Development for Teachers**

While formal learning opportunities are the central focus of policymakers and occupy the number one place in the educational market, some researchers concentrate their attention on informal professional development opportunities for teachers and explore this phenomenon. Researchers, such as Eraut & Hirsh (2007), Fullan (2001), in their studies present how teachers learn from their colleagues, observing them, sharing ideas, giving and receiving feedbacks from each other, and positive impact it has on their performance and skills development. Davis (2003) suggests that learning is maintained when the participants are actively engaged in conversations about educational issues, new material, new policy, new school books, or the challenges and difficulties their students face for instance, and work collaboratively to share their experiences. Work and learn collaboratively, give teachers a splendid opportunity to make a very important
step in their practice from “learning from others to learning with others”, and help teachers to develop their skills and knowledge as their perspectives “interpenetrate” and “interanimate” each other (Kooy, 2009, p.10). Participation in such types of professional development opportunities allows teachers to determine their goals, strategies, focus on the most important challenges they face in their everyday practice. The challenges may vary from school to school as they are determined by lots of factors. The factors that are affecting the emergence of the challenges may be the location of the school, community, access to modern technologies, etc. Teachers around the world have relatively common issues in their everyday practices and experiences, but it does not mean that these issues have to be prioritized. Informal learning opportunities allow teachers identify the most painful problems for their community and determine the ways of finding a solution.

Thus, in contrary to formal professional development opportunities, the following definition of informal professional development opportunities is proposed. Informal professional development is a form that is not necessary appointed by an educational organization or institution in order to increase the standards of education and the level of teacher’s performance, but arranged within a community, school for instance, on a voluntary basis as well as teacher’s desire to improve and deepen their knowledge, increase their performance, and develop required skills. Based on the research conducted by Dr. Eaton (2010), informal learning can have different formulations, though has the same meaning and purpose. In this case, informal learning can be used under the following names, such as “continuing education programs or courses”, “community-based education”, “adult education”, “continuing professional development”, “post-degree continuous learning”, “post-degree course work”, professional development courses”.

Informal professional development opportunities occur within a school context and
provide teachers with an opportunity to learn something new from their peer colleagues, and further reflect on their practices (Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Ludtke, Baumert, 2014). The studied literature suggests that teacher collaboration appears to be the most popular and common opportunity of informal professional development. It allows teachers to create their informal learning community, become active participants in it, interact with their colleagues, situate it at time and place convenient to them without any external pressure (Putnam & Borko, 2000).

**Collaboration as a Key Aspect of Teacher Professional Development**

As the main purpose of this paper is to study the role and potential benefit of teacher collaboration, more attention will be devoted to this aspect.

**a. What is collaboration?**

Changes in the lifestyle of the whole world touch all the aspects of it, such as social life, legislation, and education. Research on teacher preparation and professional development (mentoring, coaching, leadership, collaboration) reflect an increased interest in the educators’ desire to study these aspects deeper. Due to the occurring educational reforms, teachers need to be ready to anticipate any changes that might happen in their practice, as well as willing to accept these changes and adopt them in their practice. Teachers have to obtain the co-constructed nature of education, in general, as it is fundamental in a constructivist approach (Vygotsky, 1998). Working in a collaborative environment allows teachers to communicate and interact more in order to construct meaning and knowledge of what is the most beneficial for their students and them as educators. Being active participants in any professional discussion stimulate teachers to envision collaboration in a constructivist perspective. The implementation of modern technologies in school curriculum, new reforms in education, and constantly growing demands from higher educational establishments to raise the standards of professional
development and students’ achievement have made significant demands on teacher collaboration. Not only, these factors were crucial to draw attention to teacher collaboration as an essential aspect of professional development, but some others, which are described below. Working with students from diverse backgrounds and different levels of achievement, teachers face the problem of creating a unique model of teaching that would be beneficial for the whole classroom. It is necessary to mention, that teachers with different levels of experiences get an opportunity to obtain knowledge and to advance skills that are necessary for their everyday practices. Planning and working together is dominant in collaborative work. When teachers work collaboratively, they can construct the collective competency in order to promote and maintain continuing professional development in their practice for their students to obtain an education of the highest quality and achieve the highest positive results (Pugach & Johnson, 2002). It is of great importance to promoting and facilitate teacher collaboration in schools. Collaboration helps teachers not to feel isolated in their profession, and realize that they have associates who are ready and willing to work collaboratively on the same goals, those who can support in a puzzled situation, and give a professional advice. Fewer experienced teachers and novices have an opportunity to get valuable advice and moral support, which is imperative in teacher’s profession, from their highly experienced partners. Such type of professional “conversation” boosts novices to work much more eagerly and motivate them to work on their professional skills. On the other hand, more experienced teachers can find collaboration advantageous in terms of feeling valuable and meaningful for new teachers, who have just entered teacher’s career. Collaboration enhances the level of interaction between the participants, which makes them more open to new ideas, innovations in education, and desire to experiment and try something new in their teaching practice. Researchers have different perspectives in what forms collaboration may occur. Thus, Hargreaves (1994) tends to think that
collaboration can range from collaborative action research, coaching, mentoring to professional
dialog and team teaching. Along with such a vision of what forms collaboration can take,
Lemke & Lesley (2009) argues that collaborative learning community is the other form when
collaboration may happen, and serves teachers to concentrate on the common goals, rely on each
other, and achieve the primary objective of learning for all.

Literature suggests that teacher collaboration becomes one of the most frequent
opportunities for professional development. Researchers (Wood & Gray, 1991; Darling-
Hammond, 1995; Friend & Cook, 1991; Hargreaves, 1994; Lima 2002) investigate this
phenomenon, and have their perspectives on what collaboration means. Intelligence Community
Collaboration (1999) envisions collaboration as a synergy of the participants, that belong to one
and the same interest group, though have different ideas, attitudes, perspectives, etc., in order to
share and exchange these ideas, attitudes, beliefs, interact, learn from each other cooperate, and,
as a result, benefit from all these components. Mattessich, Murray-Close & Monsey (2001) can
complete the above mentioned, defining collaboration as a partnership between institutions,
where individuals benefit for the sake of their needs, and, further, accomplish the intended
purposes. Hawthorne and Zusman (1992) approach collaboration as “formal projects or
activities” which involve individuals from educational institutions of different levels to work
together and find the solutions to existing problems (p.432). Lima (2002) defines collaboration
as an ultimate solution for teachers to be engaged in professional development during their
career cycle, as well as learning for the sake of students’ further achievement, and reshaping
schools into “authentic learning communities” (p.7).

The phenomenon of collaboration has been meticulously studied by Friend & Cook. The
researchers have their vision of what collaboration is, offering a definition, which is closely
related to education and is purposeful of educators’ needs. Thus, collaboration can be outlined
as “a style of interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision-making” for accomplishing the targeted goal (Friend & Cook, 1990, p.72). The authors maintain the definition, pointing out that such a style does not exist by itself, it requires active participation and cooperation in mutual planning, making decisions, and solving problems that occur throughout practice in order to fulfill the desired goal. Along with the proposed definition of what collaboration is, Friend & Cook (1990), present conditions that are necessary for collaboration to happen. In many cases, collaborative work engages not only school staff, but other educational institutions. For the collaboration to be successful, certain conditions are required. First of all, the partners of collaborative opportunity have to share a single target. Other factors, such as 1) equality of the participants, 2) equal contribution to the process, 3) responsibility of the partners, 4) equal accessibility to the resources, 5) voluntary nature are meaningful for prosperous collaboration.

Darling-Hammond (2004) investigating professional learning communities, outlines opportunities for teacher professional development of “knowledge for practice”, “knowledge in practice”, and “knowledge of practice”. Knowledge of practice discloses the essence of how a participant (a teacher, in the context of education) acquires relation of knowledge to all the components of an educational process, in general. Experience in practice discloses the essence of how an individual teacher can implement acquired knowledge into everyday practice. Knowledge of practice is the recognition of how practice, theory, and collaboration between teachers and educational bodies interrelated and interdependent. As a result, collaboration helps participants to construct the meaning of a combined implementation of theory, knowledge and research into practice.
b. Characteristics of successful collaboration

Research on collaboration as a powerful aspect of teacher professional development provide with understanding of being a positive opportunity for teachers to improve professional skills and performance in order to meet the requirements and standards of modern system of education, as well as a dominant learning domain (Lohman, 2005). Collaborating, teachers can observe their colleagues; to share ideas; to interact with each other; to reflect on their practices and experiences; to obtain valuable information, and implement it into their practices; to feel themselves valuable and irreplaceable participants of communities, as well as being helpful to each other. Teacher collaboration is a process when beliefs and expectations can be reshaped and affected by many factors. Successful collaboration requires trustful relationship between the participants, constant reflection on their practices and experiences, and desire to collaborate.

Friend & Cook (1990) outline the following three characteristics for collaboration to become successful, and find such features the end product of collaboration. The first rising characteristic can be described as “a belief or attitude system which values collaboration” (p. 74). When the question of collaboration emerges, individuals have to show their interest to participate. Collaboration cannot be built without trust between the participants. Trust is an essential criterion for collaboration as members devote their time and efforts for the process to be fruitful, and, further trust transforms into respect for partners. In this meaning, trust is described as another characteristic of collaboration. The third, and meaningful as well, is creating a community. Since the participants are willing to collaborate, build trust, they can establish a community with shared interests and goals, where they can understand and support each other.

At the same time, Bunker (2008) identifies the following essential characteristics of successful collaboration, where collaboration is based on (a) reciprocal support between the participants of the community, (b) shared goals, (c) focus on the outcomes, (d) structured and
permanent learning of the participants, and (e) teacher’s reflection on the their practices and experiences on a regular basis.

Lortie (1975), investigating professional collaboration, comes to the conclusion that when school administrators do not promote and maintain collaboration, teachers work in isolation, without any visible support, and school cultures become uncreative, unprogressive and individualistic. As a result, school atmosphere has a meaningful impact on both teacher’s and student’s success. In this regard, Day (2004), in his study, tends to think that school culture, being one of the characteristics of successful collaboration, is crucial for collaboration among teachers to be successful or not, for it to result in positive outcomes both for teachers and students. There is a direct relationship between teacher’s perception of the profession, his/her expectations and beliefs, experiences and positive results. School atmosphere determines teacher’s vision of the profession he/she is in. Various models of school culture can lead to different results and, not always positive. In this way, school administration has to maintain and promote the school culture, that will give teachers motivation not only to be participants of collaborative learning, but get as much positive outcomes as it can be possible. In this way, Hargreaves (1994) insists on the fact, that school cultures cannot exist in isolation, and are created and affected by different structures that have positive and negative influence. In such a case, school cultures are determinants of whether teachers can work together or hinder their fruitful interactions. Dynamic school culture cannot be built without prior adjustments in the schools, in general. These adjustments have to be aimed at creating all the possible opportunities for teacher collaboration and facilitate teachers’ desire to work together. Such adjustments have to be directed to improve and increase job opportunities for teachers to work together on the problems that arise in their practices, rather than adjustments in school curriculum, requirements teachers have to meet, etc. If such a goal is achieved, teachers can work together and
concentrate their attention and efforts on the issues that are urgent to be discussed. These adjustments have to be also aimed at creating job opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively not occasionally, but on a regular basis.

**c. Benefits of teacher collaboration**

Despite the contradictory views on collaboration, results of which cannot always be as expected, it is still considered to be beneficial for teachers and their students. In this regard, schools and teachers can benefit in various ways while working together, discussing the urgent issues they have to overcome in their practices, trying to find the adequate solutions to the problems in informal atmosphere without any external pressure and obligation. Working collaboratively, whether planning a lesson or activity, discussing innovations in school curriculum, teachers are ready to an experiment, and are open to new ideas and practices, which can be implemented in their own practices for the sake of their students` better performance. Furthermore, teachers can reflect on their practices and determine what works and what does not for them and their classrooms to avoid mistakes in the future. Being active participants in collaborative learning, give teachers an opportunity to discuss with their colleagues any aspects of school curriculum, that might be challenging for them, in terms of defining the method or style of how to teach a particular topic, as well as obtaining ideas and feedback from their colleagues on different areas of curriculum (Cook & Friend, 1993). Professional collaboration directs all the efforts to improve teacher’s practices and performances in order to achieve the highest level of effectiveness, which will result in improved student’s outcome and job satisfaction in the future. Goddard, Goddard, and Tschannen-Moran (2007) in their recent research report that “the more teachers collaborate, the more they can converse knowledgeable about theories, methods, and processes of teaching and learning, and thus improve their instruction” (p. 879).
In contempt of the fact, suggested by Hargreaves (1994), that collaboration can lead to unexpected results, and not always positive, the researcher still determines potential benefit of teacher collaboration, which prevails negative results. The author defines the evident eleven benefits of collaboration.

- The principle of moral support is one of the most important issues for teachers. Collaborative work intensifies decisions, allows to be open to criticism and criticize others, helps participants to overcome all the challenges and frustrations they experience. Moreover, collaborative opportunities make teachers ready for any changes that occur in the modern system of education.

- Collaboration intensifies competence. “Collaboration eliminates duplication and removes redundancy between teachers and subjects as activities are coordinated, and responsibilities are shared in complimentary ways.”

- Collaboration enhances performance. There is a direct link between student’s achievement and enhanced teacher’s performance. In other words, the better teacher teaches, the higher positive outcome is expected from the student. Teachers are open to experiment and use different strategies and methods in their practices, which help them to be more confident in what they are doing. As a result, improved student’s outcome as an evident fact.

- Collaboration decreases overwhelming teachers face in their everyday practices. Collaboration allows teachers to share anxieties and difficulties that are caused by external factors. Hence, teachers do not have to overcome such difficulties on their own; they have fellow-partners, who support them.

- Collaboration helps to organize time perspectives in terms of creating reasonable and pragmatic expectations on how future changes and implementations are scheduled. The same can be addressed towards teachers and students in teaching and learning process.
• Collaboration settles borderlines and helps to diminish ambivalence and “limits excesses of guilt”. Collaboration constructs and promotes professional confidence among fellow-partners, which help “resist the tendency to become dependent on false scientific certainties of teaching effectiveness, school efficiency and the like.”

• Collaboration promotes political firmness, which results in teacher’s ability to resist and argue about the objective and irrational innovations, reforms that occur in education.

• Collaboration allows teachers to reflect on their practices, which make them more critical towards themselves and other participants “become mirrors for one’s practice, leading one to reflect on it and reformulate it more critically.”

• Collaboration prepares teachers to be open to the changes, motivating them to learn, and “facilitate to respond swiftly to changing constraints and opportunities in the surrounding environment”.

• Collaboration enhances teacher’s opportunity to acquire new information from colleagues and different educational institutions, being “a powerful source of professional learning.”

• Finally, collaboration provides teachers with lifelong performance improvement. Teachers can observe the changes “not as a task to be completed, but as an unending process of continuous improvement” (245-247).
Chapter Three

Methodology

This chapter gives the description of the issues around the research methodology in detail, including the research methods used, and when, why and where the research was conducted, the participants who took part in the research, and the role of the researcher.

A Qualitative Study

A qualitative research method was used for this study. Since practice and its improvement are the central focus of the researchers, it requires a deep analysis and investigation, which lead to the questions, that will help to conduct a research. Various definitions of what qualitative research is, were offered by Creswell (2013), Denzin & Lincoln (2000), Clandinin & Connelly (2000), Merriam (2009). Despite the variations in definition, qualitative research is described as a method that investigating the topic, inquire into it, and allows to get the notion of what is being researched. Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p.3) have defined qualitative research as follows:

Qualitative research, in contrast to quantitative research or mixed-method study, is “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.”
It was my purpose to conduct a research on role and potential benefit of teacher collaboration in elementary school in a holistic way. The research is focused on the principals, and the teachers as well as the context of the study.

**Characteristics of Qualitative Research**

This study can be defined as a qualitative research as it has the common features of the qualitative research. The following characteristics were offered by Merriam (2009, pp.14-17) as the key characteristics to describe the nature of qualitative study:

a. **Focus on meaning and understanding:** The central idea of this feature lies in “understanding the meaning people have constructed” as well as “understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspectives, not the researcher’s”. The process of study was focused on learning the meaning that the participants brought to the study, and not the researcher’s meaning and understanding.

b. **Researcher as primary instrument:** The key element of this characteristic is that “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis”. As the aim of the research is understanding, the researcher is “the ideal means of collecting and analyzing data”. Data, for this particular research, were collected through interviewing the participants (teachers) by the researcher. The interview questions were created by the researcher as well as the analyzing and interpreting the data.

c. **An inductive process:** Qualitative research is considered to be an inductive process since the researcher “gathers data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses as in positive research”. Theories are usually constructed by the researchers through the observations, interviews, and understandings of being a part of the research process.

d. **Rich description:** This final characteristic plays a significant role in describing the phenomenon of a qualitative study, as “the product of a qualitative inquiry is richly descriptive”.

Qualitative study provides deeply descriptive data “in the form of quotes from documents, field notes, and participant interviews, excerpts from videotapes, electronic communication” to support the outcomes of the research. The interview questions were open-ended, which allowed the participants of the study to describe and share their experiences, emotions and beliefs without any restrictions and choice limitations.

**Reason for Undertaking Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research for this study was chosen because “the inductive and flexible nature of qualitative data collection methods” can offer better opportunities in comparison to quantitative methods of research (Merriam, 2009, p.14). Qualitative method of data collection meets the purpose of the research as well as research questions.

**Purpose of research**

The objective of this study aimed at showing that teacher collaboration is an important aspect of teachers’ professional development, creating a safe climate for teachers to talk about their individual and occupational identity. The research aimed at investigating how collaboration can build a trustful relationship between teachers by allowing them to find something unique about their practices and experiences, and to see what teachers might have in common. Accordingly, the intention of this research is to add to the existing research the importance of undertaking professional development activities across the whole teacher’s career cycle, collaboration in particular, in order to expand and support professional skills as well as to anticipate any changes and shifts that occur in education of the constantly changing world, by uncovering the most important issues that teachers meet in their practices and experiences. The research was not aimed to argue that collaboration is a solution to all the challenges educators have to face in their practices, but to draw attention to the fact that it is considered to be the most convenient and beneficial aspect of teacher professional development among other
opportunities. It was not aimed to diminish the importance of other learning opportunities for teachers, but to show a meaningful role and potential benefit of collaboration in teaching and learning relationship.

Research questions

The Main Question: What are the goals and benefits of teacher collaboration?

Questions Related to the Study:

1. What are the most used models of teacher collaboration?
2. Is there a link between collaboration and student achievement?
3. What school conditions support or hinder teacher collaboration?

The topic of this research, its purpose and questions required a profound and detailed understanding of the teachers’ experiences and beliefs about role and benefit of teacher collaboration in elementary school. Qualitative method of collecting data provided the researcher with deeper understanding of how participants express their beliefs and interpret their experiences, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Due to the flexibility of qualitative methods of data collection, the findings of the study “are inductively derived in the data analysis process” (Merriam, 2009, p.90). Qualitative method of research gave the researcher of this study a unique opportunity to deepen into the problem of role and benefit of collaboration among teachers, to understand their experiences and beliefs.

Semi-Structured Interview

Interviews are recognized as one of the commonly used methods of data collection in qualitative research. Interviewing allows the researcher to observe behavior, feelings, or how teachers interpret the world around them. The essential element of the interview is to get the desired information for a particular study. Interviews in qualitative research are usually “open-ended and less structured” (Merriam, 2009, p.90). The interviews in a qualitative study are
differentiated by the structure, by philosophical and disciplinary orientation, and, focus group interviews.

I used semi-structured interviewing for this study, since the questions for the interview were open-ended, and all the partners in the study found it convenient to share their beliefs and experiences, which allowed me, as a researcher, to understand the complexity of the problem better, interpret some events, which cannot be observed, and, analyze the data deeper. Merriam (2009) suggests that the semi-structured interview is in the middle, between structured and unstructured. This type of interview allows the researcher to design the questions in a more flexible way, and the interview can be “a mix of more or fewer structured questions” (p. 90).

Due to the timeframe, semi-structured interview was the unique way for me to obtain the data, as it is viewed as the best opportunity when the researcher is getting a single opportunity to interview the participant (Bernard, 2006). In this regard, semi-structured interview can provide a researcher with reliable and qualitative data, which was the purpose of this study. As the researcher prepared the questions in advance, it allowed the researcher to be well-prepared and present competency in the researched field at the time of interview. The participants of the study benefited in their way, as the semi-structured interview allowed them to express their views freely without any restrictions.

**Characteristics of Semi-Structured Interview**

Semi-structured interview was chosen by the researcher as the primary and only research in this particular project, as one of the qualitative strategies to the project. “Highly-structured” or “standardized”, and “unstructured” or “informal” interviews are the other procedures defined by Merriam (2009, p.89).

Merriam (2009) describes semi-structured interview as an interview guide that is a combination of relatively structured questions. The questions in such a type of interview are
responsive, and are the guide for the explored topic, which have no fixed wording or ordered in a particular way. In their turn, the interviewers are expected to provide the researcher with accurate and detailed information related to the explored topic.

Bernard (2006) offered the following characteristics of the semi-structured interviews:

a. The interviewer and the participants engage in the formal interview.

b. An “interview guide” is designed and used by the researcher. It represents a list of questions and topics that requires discussion during the conversation.

c. The researcher follows the interview guide, which comprises open-ended questions. It allows the researcher to determine new aspects of perceiving the researched topic and motivate to pursue a new study on the related topic, but to explore it more profoundly or under different angles.

**Study context – Why Did I Choose This Particular School to Conduct My Research?**

In November 2010, I visited school A for the first time. I just came to Canada and had to send my eight-year-old daughter to school. I wanted my child feel comfortable and get used to the new life and understand the culture of the new country better and painlessly. As we are of Ukrainian background, I was recommended this particular school, because most of the students who attend the school have Ukrainian background, and some of the teachers, who work there speak Ukrainian, which was of great help for my daughter.

The problems and challenges, the teachers face during their career cycle, were and are of great importance for me, as I am a teacher myself. I came to school every day to pick up my child and always had a chance to talk to the teachers, principal, and vice-principal. The staff of the school is very friendly and open to the conversations.

In September 2011, I started my Master’s program at OISE. I started thinking of conducting research in this field, after taking courses on teacher development during the first
and second years of study. I decided to share and discuss my ideas with Dr. Kosnik and Dr. Beck, who maintained my choice and inspired me to launch the project. As my research is focused on one of the aspects of teachers’ professional development, I had to choose the school where I could implement my ideas. As I knew the teachers and the principal, I decided to choose school A as the research site. To start with, I asked the school principal’s permission to explain and describe the study I wanted to pursue. The principal kindly agreed to listen to me and expressed his willingness in the study. Meanwhile, I was working on the Ethics Review to submit to the Board Ethics of the University of Toronto and the Ethics Review to submit to the Toronto Catholic District School Board. I got permission from the principal of the school for conducting the research in the school as well. In a short time, I got an approval to conduct research from the Board Ethics of the University of Toronto and the Toronto Catholic District School Board. In June 2013 everything was prepared to start my research.

School A was a relatively small elementary school from junior kindergarten to grade 8, located in the center of Etobicoke area. The population of the school was 625 students and the staff of 40 teachers. The building of the school was in an adequate condition to maintain elementary school activities. There was enough space for the staff of the school to organize meetings, have lunch and coffee. Moreover, the school got more space owing to the new building, which had been erected two years ago. The gym was in the excellent condition, so the staff of the school had all the facilities for the school activities. The library resource center was equipped with the modern facilities, and the shelves were full of the books and magazines of different genres, appropriate to the age and needs of the students. The school environment was enriched by the Eastern Rite traditions.

School curriculum was based on sound academics and delivered according to the guidelines of Ministry of Education and Toronto Catholic District School Board. Moreover, a
great variety of programs met all the needs of a diversified population of the school. Special education support programs as well as English as a second language were provided for the students who were experiencing some difficulties and for the students with special needs. Core French was also taught from grade 1 to grade 8.

International Language programs gave the students an opportunity to experience the language and traditions of Ukrainian heritage. The school received a significant support from the Ukrainian church as well as from the Ukrainian community to support different cultural and historical events in Ukrainian style.

The staff of the Toronto Catholic District School Board music department provided primary and junior students with the vocal music program and an instrumental string music program for the students of grade 6 to grade 8. Boys and girls soccer, basketball, cross-country running, track and field, school council and school choir were provided for the students as extra-curricular and co-curricular activities. The school maintained the friendly environment among students and teachers, promoted the importance of support and good behavior not only within the school, but in the society, in general. The atmosphere in the school was very friendly, and the teachers were very accommodating and willing to cooperate. The school had enough space, and it was not difficult to arrange meetings with the teachers at the time and site convenient to them. All the participants of this study had their classrooms, so it was of great help and convenience for both of the participants and the researcher. We did not have to waste our precious time in finding the site for the interviews.
Participants

The first meeting was arranged on June 7th at School A with the principal and the teachers. The objective of this meeting was to introduce myself and the research project to the principal and the teachers of Grade 4 to 8. I also asked official permission from the principal to offer the teachers to participate in my study. I provided the teachers with all the required information. The timeframe had been discussed, and I also explained that the interviews would be scheduled at a time and location that was convenient for the participants. I assured the teachers that the interviews would be audio-recorded and transcribed to ensure the accuracy.

Data Collection

I started to collect the data in early June, 2013. I arranged the meetings with the participants at a time and location convenient to them. Data collection began with the interviews which were audiotaped and field notes as one of the primary tools of collecting data for qualitative research. The form of informal dialog with the participants was also used for data collection.

The data consisted of:

a. Audiotaped interviews
I used a voice recorder to audiotape the interviews with the participants to ensure “that everything said was preserved for analysis” (Merriam, 2009).

b. Audio-taped and transcribed formal interviews with the participants
An interview with each participant was approximately an hour long. After each interview, the answers were analyzed in detail by me in order to clarify the provided information by the members, and, after were transcribed to the text.

c. Field notes from informal conversations with the participants
I took notes while informal conversations with the teachers. Field notes comprised the comments, observations and feelings both of the participants and me. Field notes helped to comprehend and perceive the feelings, emotions of the participants in order to obtain a better understanding of what was of utmost importance for them.

The Role of the Researcher

The researcher is a primary instrument for collecting and analyzing the data (Merriam, 2009). The self collects data, conducts surveys, interviews and observes behavior of the participants. The researcher has to describe relevant aspects of self, including any biases and assumptions, expectations, and experiences to qualify the ability to conduct research (Greenbank, 2003).

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) define the qualitative researcher as “bricoleur or maker of quilts, which uses different esthetic and material tools” for the research (p.4). The process of qualitative research is considered to be inductive. In this case, the researcher collects the data “to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses as in positive research” (Meriam, 2009, p. 15).

When my research was introduced to the participants in early June, they were informed that the interviews would be audio-recorded. I also got a chance to observe and make some notes during the informal meetings with teachers. It provided with the discussion of the critical issues of the importance of undertaking professional development opportunities, the role of collaboration in teacher’s career as well as students’ achievement and the ways to improve it. Being at the same time a researcher and a teacher, helped me to enrich the research in many respects. Firstly, it contributed to building trust between the researcher and the participants. As I have already mentioned, I am a teacher myself with the experience of teaching in Ukrainian and Canadian schools. In this regard, being familiar with the challenges teachers have to face in their
everyday practice, it helped me a lot to formulate questions in the way to understand the problem better. The participants showed more interest in participating in the study and were more open to the discussion, when I shared my experiences and feelings not only as a researcher, but as a teacher as well. The participants of the study were eagerly ready to contribute their time and effort in my research. There was no tension between the researcher and the participating teachers, which resulted in natural behavior and genuine responses to the interview questions.

Data Analysis Procedures

An approach to analyzing the data begins with well-organized recordkeeping. The organization of the data “must be completed once all the data have been collected to enable intensive analysis” (Merriam, 2009, p.171). When planning a research, the researcher states the problem, goal and creates the list of questions that relate to the targeted problem. Despite mentioned above, the final product remains unknown to the researcher, as the researcher cannot predict the result of the study. In such a case, data analysis should be done while collecting data in order to avoid repetition and data overwhelming as well as to get the desired goal. “data analyzed while being collected are at the same time parsimonious and illuminating” (Merriam, 2009, p.171).

The interviews with the participating teachers were approximately an hour long. Formally, each participant was interviewed on a single occasion, due to the timeframe. Informal discussions with the teachers also took place, and the notes were made by the researcher. All the data collected, while conducting the qualitative research, were organized according to the data analysis process, outlined by Creswell (2013).

Data Organization and Preparation for Further Analysis: All the data collected were organized in order. All the audio-taped interviews (4) with the teachers were transcribed into
text and stored on files in a computer like Microsoft Word files; all the field notes while conducting the research, were typed and saved electronically; all the informal information obtained from the participants, which was not audio-taped, was scanned and saved as an electronic file.

Data Reading and Comprehending: When the collected data were organized, my attention was focused on comprehending the database and making sense of it. Moreover, I made important notes and memos from what had been read in order to explore the database.

Data Classification: The next important step in the process of data analysis was classifying the data to highlight the main topics of the research. It helped to understand the meaning of the data better, and the sense of it were interpreted.

Data Coding: The classified data were coded. The transcripts of the interviews were coded, “units” were identified through reading of each interview and applied to a particular code.

Data Interpretation: Meaning was made out of the data collected from the study. The findings supported the prior research and suggested the necessity to design new question related to the study in order to examine the problem from a different angle.

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are the key issues of any research as they result in authentic findings presentation and reliable knowledge of the study. Creswell (2013) described validation in qualitative research as “an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants” (p.249). Merriam (2009, pp.210-223) suggested the following validation strategies, which were successfully used in this research:
Triangulation: To ensure for validity and reliability, triangulation is one of the primary strategies in qualitative research. It allows to compare and check the collected data through various methods of data collection. Different approaches were used in data collection for this research; all the interviews were completed, and it gave an opportunity to clarify the themes and to look at the findings of the study from different perspectives.

Member check/Respondent validation: To avoid the misinterpreting and misunderstanding of the meaning of the collected data, member check or respondent validation is the unique way to identify the biases. While the data were obtaining for the purpose of the research, clarification and confirmation about the data collected were done between the researcher and the participating teachers.

Adequate engagement in data collection: It is hard to predict the exact time the research can take. It depends on many factors, such as participants’ availability, questions of the study, and the answers, which depend on the research itself. It took approximately a month to collect the required data for the study. During this period, I was interviewing the participants on the formal basis as well as having informal discussions with the teachers.

Researcher’s position/Reflexivity: Sometimes the position of the research, his or her assumptions regarding the research can play a crucial role in the research. It is important for the researcher to be objective about the collected data and the outcomes of the study. There was some personal interest of mine, and I paid more attention to the questions and responses I gave preference.

Peer examination/Peer review: It is a beneficial strategy for the researcher and those who are involved in the process of research. Sometimes, devoting more attention to preferred themes, the researcher unwittingly disregard the ideas, which might also be important in the study and worth revising.
Though my thesis supervisor was not presented while collecting data, he played an important and valuable role in the process of checking the accuracy of the collected data and its analysis. My thesis supervisor provided me not only with the moral support, but with valuable feedback and advice. Without his assistance, the validity and reliability of the study would not be accomplished.

**Ethics and Confidentiality**

Ethics and confidentiality are the crucial concerns in the process of research, qualitative research, in particular, as it involves human participants. The researcher does not have to forget about an important element, such as the possibility of participant exploitation through the interactive nature of the research process. Such crucial concepts, as confidentiality and anonymity (Creswell, 2007, p.174) must be maintained during the process of research and after it is finished.

The participants of the study were informed by me about the nature of the research and the purpose of it, as well as were assured that their identity would not be revealed. The potential participants were also notified of the right to refuse to participate without having to give a reason as well as that they at no time would be judged or evaluated and no value judgment would be placed on their responses. In case they chose to withdraw from the study, all recordings of the interviews as well as the transcripts would be destroyed if that were their wish. All paper transcripts of their interviews would be shredded, and all electronic files would be securely destroyed as per the University of Toronto’s Data Security Standards for Personally Identifiable and Other Confidential Data in Research. The participants might decline to answer any specific questions without providing a reason. The participants were explained that confidentiality would be maintained at all times; pseudonyms would be used in place of participants’ actual names in any written work, oral presentations, or publications to protect
participants from identification. The participants did not undergo any possible risk in the project. I emphasized that participation in the project might be beneficial for the teachers as it included the opportunity to reflect on their teacher preparation and teaching practice. There was no pressure on the potential participants as the involvement in the research project was entirely voluntary.

During the first meeting with the potential participants, letter of introduction, recruitment letter, and all the consent forms were prepared by me. All the required documents were given to the potential participants, and they were given some time to consider whether they were willing to participate in the research. In a couple of days, I received the consent forms signed by the future participants. It meant that the research process could be started.

The participants were provided with the contact information of mine and my supervisor, in case they wanted to clarify some information or details about the research project. Contact information of the participants was asked for further confirmation and ethical issues as well as in case they were interested in the results of the study, final reports and/or transcripts of their interviews. All the mentioned above could be sent to the email addresses provided by the participants. Optionally, the participants of the study might supply postal address so that the results could be sent there.
Chapter Four

Findings and Discussion

This research investigates teacher collaboration as an important aspect of teachers’ professional development that helps in creating a safe climate for teachers to talk about their individual and occupational identity. The research aimed at investigating how collaboration can build a trustful relationship between teachers by allowing them to find something unique about their practices and experiences, and to see what teachers might have in common, as well as to analyze the goals teachers set, and to find out whether collaboration is a crucial and beneficial aspect of teacher professional development. Accordingly, the purpose of the study is to add to the existing research the importance of undertaking professional development activities across the whole teacher’s career cycle, collaboration in particular, in order to advance and maintain professional skills as well as to anticipate any changes and shifts that occur in education of the constantly changing world, by uncovering the most important issues that teachers meet in their practices and experiences. The research was not aimed to argue that collaboration is a solution to all the challenges educators have to face in their practices, but to draw attention to the fact that it is considered to be the most convenient and beneficial aspect of teacher professional development among other opportunities. It was not aimed to diminish the importance of other learning opportunities for teachers, but to show a meaningful role and potential benefit of collaboration in teaching and learning relationship.

The findings of the research report on teachers’ points of view about teacher professional development, collaboration, in particular. There is a common view, expressed by the participated teachers; that collaboration is a fundamental aspect of their career development. The results of the study indicate that teachers set the same goals, find collaboration beneficial in
many ways in terms of professional development, give preference to the same form/model of collaborative learning, find direct link between teacher collaboration and student progress. The findings of the study are discussed in accordance with the Research Questions and are classified into goals and benefits of collaboration; models of collaboration; link between collaboration and student achievement; conditions that support and hinder collaboration, as well as consider the relationship between the findings of this research and previous studies.

**Goals and Benefits of Teacher Collaboration**

Much has been described in the texts about goals and benefits of teacher collaboration. Schools, students, and teachers benefit in many different ways when teachers get an opportunity and support to work more together, to share their ideas, fears and beliefs; reflect on their teacher preparation and teaching practice. The evidence suggests a positive and a beneficial relationship between teacher collaboration and student achievement. The utmost important aspect of collaborative activity is to direct it in the way to update teacher’s performance and student’s positive outcome. Regardless, the most significant aspect of collaborative activities is to promote learning among teachers. Collaboration allows individual teachers to advance their professional skills. In its turn, professional development, in general, is aimed at providing teachers with the data that have a positive impact on their practices. At the same time, Butler, Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger and Beckingham (2004) suggest that collaboration as a critical aspect of professional development motivates teachers to conduct an inquiry collectively, regarding changing their teaching for the better practice. The authors advocate teacher’s desire to collaborate not only within a school they work at, but within different educational organizations in order to develop new approaches to teaching, that could bring potential benefit into teaching practice, and will result in improved teaching performance and students’ progress. Fresh ideas and new approaches in the process of teaching and learning, give teachers a possibility to
experiment in their classrooms, trying these new methods, finding the best and the most suitable model of teaching for their students, and witness the success and potential benefit of collaboration. Collaboration allows teachers to identify common challenges, find solutions to the existing problems, and “develop a shared language for talking about teaching and construct knowledge within a discourse community” (Englert & Tarrant, 1995, p. 332). Potential benefit of collaboration between teachers can reflect on active problem solving to the challenges teachers and schools experience (Hargreaves, 1994). The most significant aspects of collaboration due to which teachers and schools find this model of professional development opportunity beneficial, serve at (1) maintaining moral support among teachers, (2) enhancing teacher’s professional competence, (3) raising the standards of professional performance, (4) decreasing overwhelming in practice, (5) helping teachers to feel valuable, maintaining professional confidence, (6) helping teachers to feel satisfaction with the chosen profession, (7) giving an opportunity to reflect on their practices across their career cycle, (8) having an opportunity to improve their skills and performance on a regular basis, and not occasionally.

The findings of the research reveal a picture of the importance of teacher collaboration. The participants of the study maintained recent research on benefits, purpose and goals of teacher collaboration with the responses to the questions.

Speaker # 1 described the primary goal and purpose of teacher collaboration as “is to have teachers reflect, improve and talk about current teaching practices”, “should be a two-way street where all teachers involved share the same philosophy of learning. All teachers have to take an active role in bringing forth new lesson ideas for student learning. It should be a time and place where assessment, lesson design and student learning is discussed.”

Speaker # 3 found that the primary goal of teacher collaboration is “each
student to experience success.”

Speaker # 2 outlined the purpose and the goal of the collaboration, saying “the main purpose of teacher collaboration is creating common learning goals and share ideas and strategies for creating student success. It gives us an opportunity to exchange the ideas we have and benefit from the ideas of others.” It was also mentioned that” collaboration should be cross-divisional to ensure continuity in teaching methodologies as opposed to divisional or grade meetings which are very limited in scope and overall effectiveness.”

Speaker # 4 insisted on ”student achievement and well-being.”

The results of the study indicate that all the participants set the same goals as described in recent research and find collaboration with peers beneficial for both participants of the teaching and learning process: teachers and students. The four teachers found that due to the opportunity to collaborate with each other, they could implement new ideas, practices, approaches and methods in their practices. Moreover, they could monitor what was working better for their students, which resulted in the students achievement, teacher’s moral satisfaction, and confidence.

Speaker # 1 stated, “I look forward to our weekly meetings with my grade partners. At these meetings, we have done moderated marking, and we discuss ways on how to integrate our units of study.”

The other participant of this study, speaker # 3, benefited in the following way, saying “collaboration helps to build enthusiasm and gives lots of support.”

Speaker # 2, another participant of the study, found collaboration beneficial as well, “I have benefited from the ideas of others through collaboration as well as share my ideas and experiences with others.”

The fourth participant, speaker # 4 stated that collaboration “makes me a much more confident teacher.”
The participants of the study also mentioned that it was imperative for them to collaborate because the majority of the students, they work with, are not fluent in English, as they come from the countries where English is not their first language. Under such circumstances, the curriculum still had to be delivered according to the Ministry of Education requirements and requirements of Toronto Catholic District School Board. In this regard, teachers were in the constant searching for the best methods and approaches in teaching and the way of combining the mentioned above requirements with the problems they faced on a daily basis in their teaching practice. Despite the fact that collaboration as a significant aspect of teacher professional development is the number one topic for discussion among educators, researchers, policymakers, not much attention is devoted to the issue of what skills and knowledge teachers have to develop when working with the students of diverse background. In such a case, skills and knowledge have to be constructed in the way to suit every student. Each student is unique and his/her prior knowledge is determined by the culture, environment, family, and traditions. It will be difficult for an individual teacher to create, moreover, develop the required skills and knowledge in isolation. Collaborative learning opportunities can be meaningful in constructing and maintaining knowledge and skills of this type.

**Models of Teacher Collaboration**

Teacher collaboration and teachers learning together have become the topic that increased interest among the researchers and policy-makers around the world. If previously attention was focused on the development of a teacher as an individual, currently researchers are exploring the area, where teachers become active participants of collaborative communities focusing on enhancing their knowledge and performance (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999). Much research has been done on the models and forms of teacher collaboration. A variety of models of teacher collaboration has been proposed and investigated by the researchers. Professional learning
communities (Hargreaves, 2003), communities of practice (Darling-Hammond, 1998), teacher leadership (Patterson & Patterson, 2004), teacher study groups (Cayuso, Fegan, & McAlister, 2004), whole faculty study groups (Cayuso, Fegan, & McAlister, 2004), book study groups (Cayuso, Fegan, & McAlister, 2004). All these models of collaboration can be formal or informal in their nature, different topics can be discussed by the participants ranging from learning and discussing new strategies and approaches in teaching to the social factors that affect students’ achievement.

Recent studies on teacher professional development indicate that both formal and informal strategies for professional development are significant in improving teaching practice. Still, most teachers give preference to informal forms/models of professional development, collaboration, in particular.

The findings of this study report on the fact that three participants of the project give preference to informal forms of collaboration, motivating “informal meetings in order to deal with situations and ideas as they arise as opposed to scheduled meetings consistently over time” (Speaker # 2, one of the participants in the study).

Speaker # 4 prefers informal models of collaboration, explaining that “teachers feel more at ease and willing to share ideas because they want to and not because they are forced to. Many meetings that just happen in the hallways create amazing results. Sometimes, you cannot wait for a formal meeting, you need information right away.”

Speaker # 3 tends to think “informal meetings are more productive.”

Speaker # 1 provided the study with the opposite point of view. The participant gives preference to formal meetings, arguing that “there is a predetermined day and set time that is expected by all teachers involved. Also, with formal meetings, there is an expected...
agenda where we discuss issues that come up with regards to curriculum planning and assessment.”

The results of this study present that the major number of the participants give preference to the informal models of collaboration, though the only one supported the formal meetings. The participating teachers found all the forms and models of collaboration productive and useful, giving priorities to various aspects of teaching.

**Link Between Teacher Collaboration and Student Achievement**

One of the dominant goals of collaboration is students’ achievement. Educators are under the constant pressure to improve and adapt their skills and knowledge according to the requirements of policy-makers, Ministry of Education guidelines and Boards of Education guidelines. Teachers have to work with the diverse students who have different levels of knowledge, cultural, ethnic and social backgrounds. These and other factors result in student achievement, which is not always positive. All these challenges require teachers to be active participants in professional development activities. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) outline in their research that students’ achievement depends on teacher learning. Still, the authors argue “the ultimate playoff of teachers’ learning opportunities depends upon teachers’ opportunities and commitment to work together to improve instruction” which results in students’ success.

The participants of this study reported that one of the reasons that motivate them to take an active part in a collaborative process is the students’ achievement. They all added that when they see their students as successful learners, they get moral satisfaction, and this fact motivates them to collaborate more and look for new ideas and approaches in teaching.

Speaker # 1 reports on the evidence of the link between teacher collaboration and student achievement, saying “with teacher collaboration, there is always a discussion about how to improve teaching practices so that all students and learners can achieve a high standard of
success. For example, teachers will discuss a math concept like fractions and will share ideas about how to incorporate a manipulative so that students are better able to visualize a fraction and decimal numbers.”

Speaker # 2 added “providing it is constructive collaboration and is implemented by all teachers involved. It most can have a positive influence on student achievement.”

**Conditions that Support and Hinder Teacher Collaboration**

The research on teacher professional development suggests the fact that the more teachers are involved in any collaboration, the more significant effect it has on their practice and, as a result, improves student’s achievement. Darling-Hammond (1998) describes the evidence of what makes teachers professionals. When school administrators promote professional collaborative activities, teachers become active participants in such activities. The process of professional learning becomes collective and results in teacher effectiveness. To achieve efficiency in teaching, teacher leaders learn from more experienced colleagues and their peers while being the participants of professional collaboration activities. To improve teaching, school leaders have to motivate and support teachers in taking an active part in continuous professional development. In order to meet all the demands of the modern system of education, to satisfy the needs of diverse students, to be a confident and a skillful teacher, and, to be competent in academic content, teachers need to accomplish their skills and enlarge knowledge continually. Teachers do not have to be isolated and seek ideas on improving their skills for better results of their students on their own, they have to feel support from the schools and educational institutions as well as from their colleagues. Collective professional activities help to build trust among the participants, and further, motivate teachers to inquire and reflect on their practices. All these factors allow teachers to experiment in his/her practice, take risks, identify challenges and find solutions. Collective professional learning is a meaningful aspect in
terms of fulfilling the requirements of Ministry of Education and “public expectation for schools and student performance” (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, Orphanos, 2009, p.ii). Collective learning has to be organized in such a way that it can be helpful for teachers in creating knowledge and skills that are beneficial for each diverse learner. Hence, teachers have to be provided with the opportunities to develop and update a set of competencies that are beneficial for both participants of a learning process. In terms of the study, these participants are the teacher and the learner.

Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009), in their study on teacher professional development, highlight that there are conditions that support teachers to learn together in order to make the process of collaboration successful. To make the process of collaboration successful, conditions that support it has to be taken into account. Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996) suggest that (1) school size and time planning; (2) supportive leadership and mutual respect; (3) school climate; (4) correlation of complexity and teachers as decision makers with learning communities are the essential conditions to support teacher collaboration.

Teacher collaboration depends on two crucial factors that either support or hinder this learning opportunity. These factors are school culture and principal’s role. To create a positive and successful collaborative atmosphere, both teachers and administrators have to be active participants in this professional learning activity. When collaboration, trust, and innovation are supported in learning environments, it leads to positive and powerful shift in teacher practice and improvement. Under such circumstances, positive school culture is created and becomes a factor that support teacher professional development (Van Benschoten, 2008).

The participants of this research outlined the following factors that facilitate teacher collaboration:

1. teacher’s active participation in discussions
Speaker # 1 provided with the following comments. “The factors that facilitate collaboration with colleagues is if the teachers each take a turn to discuss issues and ideas that come up.”

2. sharing new ideas and issues

Speaker # 4 suggested that “teachers that are willing to stay current in their teaching practices and are willing to share new ideas and to try new ones.”

Speaker # 3 supported that, saying “willingness to share and try different ideas.”

3. being open to take risks and to try new ideas in order to monitor the success of their students

Speaker # 4 mentioned “Teachers need to be risk takers and willing to try ideas from new teachers.”

Speaker # 2 supported this idea saying that “open-minded teachers who are willing to try new things outside of the box or a willingness to change or adapt a program based on students needs.”

4. mutual respect

Mutual respect appeared to be a central component for all the participants of the study, that determines collaboration to be successful which results in productive outcomes.

Speaker # 4 added “Mutual respect among teachers is important as well as having nonconfrontational teachers.”

5. teach random grades which motivate teachers for greater interaction with each other.

Speaker # 4 suggested that,” Getting teachers to change grades will get them to need each other more.”

Along with the factors that facilitate teacher collaboration as an important aspect of professional development, there are some constraints that hinder it. As it is outlined by Van
Benschoten (2008), conflict becomes a significant challenge that makes teachers feel uncomfortable. Collaboration requires critical reflection on the ideas and practices suggested by the participants in the process as well as respect to peers. Due to cultural context and participants’ personal perception of the teacher profession, the collaborative process can be unexpected which may lead to a zero result.

Factors, mentioned by the participating teachers in this study that hinder teacher collaboration maintained the results of the previous research. They all reported that lack of respect between the administrators and teachers would lead to negative results as well as unwillingness to be open to new ideas.

“The factors that hinder collaboration with colleagues is when the time spent together is not spent productively or when colleagues disagree on certain issues. For example, we spent 20 minutes trying to discuss why a child’s response was a level 3 rather that a level 2. All parties involved have to have an open mind and listen to the rational that is provided by his/her colleagues” (Speaker #1).

Speaker # 2 mentioned that “teachers who are too rigid and unwilling to try new things or take the ideas or advice of others.”

Speaker # 3 added “different teaching philosophies.”

Speaker # 4 described the following factors that hinder collaborative process “teachers doing the same thing or teaching the same grade every year that do not come up with new ideas, those not willing to try new ideas and methods, teachers who do not respect each other, teachers who are not willing to take time out of their day to meet with each other, principals who demand long written reports on results of meetings.”

This project was aimed to attract attention to collaboration as a crucial factor in teacher career and professional growth. The results of the study indicate that teachers, who participated
in this project, indeed, find collaborative activities beneficial in many ways. The participants believe that collaboration allows teachers to interact with colleagues more, set goals, find solutions, overcome challenges, they face in their practices, and finally, feel themselves professionals. Collaboration helps teachers to feel valuable and promotes job satisfaction. Teachers believe that collaboration is inseparable part of student’s success, as working together with other colleagues, they can find the same challenges their students experience or help an individual student, who experience the problem, that others do not. Such type of professional development allows teachers to try new strategies in their practices and determine the best one that could be beneficial for every individual student in their classrooms. Moreover, it helps to create a positive school culture, where each representative of the school community would not only be a colleague, but become a true friend, who is ready to give a helping hand in an awkward moment without judging.

All the teachers participated in the study voluntarily. The contribution of the participants in the study is extremely significant. During the interviews and informal meetings, they helped the researcher to understand the posed problem profoundly and under several angles. The teachers expressed their expectations and beliefs so brightly and with a passion that it was obvious they were devoting all their knowledge and skills to their students and help them to experience success. The participants were not afraid to discuss the challenges they had overcome, or fears they experienced in their practices. An opportunity to reflect on their practices encouraged teachers to learn more, develop and improve their professional skills to use different professional development opportunities. Different points of view, willingness to collaborate with me as a researcher, as well as their colleagues, willingness to share their ideas, beliefs, experiences, practices, fears, and expectations, readiness to devote their precious time to the project – all these factors describe teachers as professionals, who are open to new ideas for
the sake of the requirements of the modern society and ready to improve their teaching practice and skills in order to observe the successful achievements of their students. The participated teachers expressed their desire to take part in the studies like that in the future. The teachers’ participation in this project motivates me not to stop on the achieved, but has awoken a great desire to study the topic of teacher collaboration deeper and pursue new research in the future.
Chapter Five
Implications and Future Research

This chapter summarizes the research study on calling for more support of teacher collaboration as one of the aspects of teacher professional development and outlining the role and potential benefit of collaboration in elementary school, as well as the implications of the study findings in order to enhance the importance of teacher collaboration, and suggestions for future research. Limitations of the study are described in this chapter as well.

The focus of the research and the main issues in the findings are congruous with the research questions, which are listed below:

Main question of the study is - What are the goals and benefits of teacher collaboration?

Sub - questions:
1. What are the most used models of teacher collaboration?
2. Is there a link between collaboration and student achievement?
3. What school conditions support or hinder teacher collaboration?

Conclusions and Implications

The major theme that came out from this study was collaboration, its role, and potential benefit to teachers and their students, its goals, and its importance and significance across teacher career cycle. Being an essential component of teacher professional development, collaboration is aimed to enhance teacher’s practice, promote job satisfaction, and allow teachers to analyze and reflect on their practices (Fullan, 1991). The analysis of the data collected from this research maintains the theory of researchers described in this thesis. While teachers, school administrators and policy-makers set the same goals, open to sharing the ideas, ready to hear each other, assess the demands of a particular situation, commence actions, and
develop right expectations collaboration will occur. As a result, it will be beneficial for educators and students. Collaboration becomes productive only when it is a combination of well-designed and purposeful activities that help to establish enhanced relationships between teachers. “The responsibility for collaborating can either be the sole responsibility of one individual who seek to improve a professional relationship, or a joint commitment of two or more people who wish to improve their working relationship” (Cramer, 1998, p.3).

The findings of the study suggested that teacher collaboration as a fundamental aspect of teacher professional development can create a safe climate for teachers in which to talk about their individual and professional identity. The findings also proved that collaboration between teachers can build trust by allowing educators to see what is unique about their experiences, as well as what they have in common. The findings of this study illustrated the relation between teacher collaboration and students’ achievement. Beck and Kosnik (2006) describe the process of collaborative learning as a critical aspect of constructivist teaching and learning, where participants’ interaction occurs between collaboration and community they belong to. Members’ relationship depends on the community, whether they know each other well enough to create a safe climate to collaborate, and build trust among the participants. In this case, collaboration will be successful, productive, bring fruitful results as well as “strengthens community, since it ensures that students get to know each other better and also helps them develop social inclinations and skills” (p. 85).

This research motivated me to explore the problems teachers face in Canadian schools, whether the teachers get support from the administration and their colleagues, as well as support from Board of Education and Ministry of Education. The curiosity to learn more about Canadian schools, teachers’ perception of their profession, their beliefs and expectations, all these aspects led me to start this project.
The most important aspects obtained from this research include the following:

- teachers’ perception of their profession, the significance of teacher’s role in students’ achievement
- potential benefit of teacher collaboration both for teachers and students
- conditions that support teacher professional development.

This study helped to learn how collaborative relationships can be developed and maintained among the teachers, how collaboration facilitates teachers’ professional development, which result in their professional confidence, desire to master new teaching techniques, and be open to new ideas. The participants identified the most important aspects of collaboration that help them to increase the level of their performance. First, they found that interaction with their colleagues provided various opportunities that help them not to fear to implement new ideas, practices, approaches, and methods in teaching. At the same time, the teachers have an opportunity to get a quick feedback from their peers. Second, all the participants indicated that collaboration help them to build enthusiasm, be more confident as educators, and achieve moral satisfaction in their career that result in students’ achievement. These factors are the key components of successful teaching described in the studies of the researchers. Third, the teachers showed great interest in participating in various workshops, activities, programs offered by the school as well as other educational institutions. Moreover, they showed their readiness and desire to collaborate with teachers from different schools in order to share their experiences, ideas, frustrations, and get something new from others to implement in their teaching practice. Finally, the participants discovered that collaboration was not only crucial in their practice, but extremely advantageous and desirable to understand what works and what does not work in their everyday teaching practice, to minimize the fear of risk taking, to support each other. It also helped the participants to combine their knowledge to
overcome difficulties they face at school, and engage new teachers to be active members of the collaborative work. It also provided the participants with an opportunity to reflect on their teacher preparation and teaching practice as well as outline the most important and valuable elements of collaboration to use in their everyday practice.

Friend & Cook’s (1991) conception of collaboration as specific to the needs of educators, of school-based collaboration as joint planning, decision making, and problem solving that may occur in a variety of formal or informal group configurations for the purpose of accomplishing a common goal, was supported in this research. The participants of the study maintained this conception providing with the rich answers to the research questions.

Limitations of the Research

a. Reflections of the participants.

Though the participants of this study were very busy with their school routine, because it was almost the end of the academic year, they showed their willingness to devote most of their time to this research. The participants were full of experiences and ideas; they wanted to share with me. They all mentioned that it was not enough time for them to reflect on their teacher preparation and teaching practice in full. They expected to receive more challenging questions, and even suggested that they could be not only individually interviewed, but be the participants of a round-table discussion.

After the research had been completed, I still visited this school, because I had to pick up my child, as it has been mentioned before (my child attends this school). I met the participants of the study pretty often, and I was asked so many times whether I was planning to pursue a new project related to the topic of teacher professional development. The teachers mentioned that it would be a great pleasure for them to be active participants in new research.
b. Reflections of the researcher.

If I had an opportunity to start this project from the very beginning, I would definitely modify the structure of the research itself; change the content of the research questions, adding the questions that could help to explore deeper the chosen topic; rethink the procedure of collecting data; and involve more participants to this project to hear different points of view, which either maintained more the findings of the study, or provided the study with the opposite outcomes.

Even though I was satisfied with the findings of this study, I would like to include more research questions. While interviewing the participants, lots of other questions, I could ask, came up to my mind. Moreover, the teachers were very open for the discussion and sincere in sharing their ideas, beliefs, frustrations, experiences, expectations about the process of education, and the career as a teacher. However, unfortunately, I was limited by the number of research questions as well as time given to conducting this research.

c. Voice recording.

Audiotaping was used as one of the main methods to collect the data. I experienced no problems with voice-recording of the participants, because they all gave their permission to be audiotaped, signing the consent forms. However, what I noticed was that the participants were more open to the discussion in informal conversations. During informal conversations, I was making field notes. So, I was able to get more valuable data for this study.

One of the speakers was rather open for the conversation with me while being audio-taped, but mentioned that “I don`t mind being voice recorded, but I feel more confident when I have an informal conversation with the interviewer”. I became conscious of the fact that, if I have a chance in the future to pursue a new research project, I will do my best and find the best
way to minimize an unpleasant influence of voice-recording on the participants and make the experience of being participants more pleasant for them.

**d. Data collection.**

Other important limitations of the study would be the time limitation for the data collection, the limitation of the number of the participants, and the limitation of informal interaction with the teachers. If I had more time to interact with the participants, I would get more data for this research. If I get a chance in future to conduct a similar research, I will start it earlier and will schedule it in a little bit different way that can be more suitable for the participants.

I was also limited by the number of the participants. Only four teachers were involved in this research. Though, as it was mentioned by me before, I was completely satisfied with the findings of the study, I would like to interview more teachers to get the better understanding of the research problem. Probably, other teachers have different views as for teacher collaboration and give priority to other aspects of their professional development, or they share the same views as their peers, which would maintain the importance of the research topic.

It would be interesting to me, as a researcher, to conduct the same research not only within one school, but interview the teachers from the schools that are located within Greater Toronto Area and compare the results of the findings. This aspect could be interesting for the future research.

**Implications for Future Research**

This research was a pilot research for my future projects. A variety of questions arises from this research that could be explored in the future studies. These involve the issues about the factors that facilitate and hinder students’ achievement due to the existence or lack of collaboration among teachers; factors such as ethnicity, gender, religion, age, dialect, accent,
etc. that influence any aspects of teaching; other forms and models of teacher professional development, such as leadership, mentoring, peer coaching, critical development teams, etc. Teachers have to improve their professional skills, deepen knowledge, enhance their practices, reflect on their experiences. The interest is usually focused on the role of the teacher in teaching and learning process as well as professional development opportunities. Modern society, Ministry of Education, and different educational institutions expect teachers to respond quickly to any changes that occur in the current system of education, and, accordingly, develop the required professional skills in order to meet demands. Another factor that requires teachers to develop their professional skills and satisfy the needs of each learner is steadily growing population of diverse students. In this case, teachers have to possess individual professional competencies. Hence, there is a question to study:

What professional competencies a teacher has to possess to meet the requirements of the modern system of education?

Accordingly, there are some other sub-questions that are related to the primary question.

What professional development opportunities can be helpful in developing professional competencies?

What competencies an individual teacher has to possess to satisfy the needs of each diverse student?

How to develop and maintain professional competencies in conditions of varying standards?

Answering to these and other questions will allow teachers to create the perfect model of teaching as well as for policymakers and teacher educators provide teachers with all the required professional development opportunities, which will result in excellent teacher performance and success of each student. The issues can be explored not only on a local level within the province
of Ontario, but across Canada, or even on an international level. Exploring this problem on an international level would allow to exchange and obtain experiences, and find something valuable that could be implemented in the Canadian system of education to make it more beneficial for each member of the society.


*Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 1*(1), 69-86.


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Appendix:

Interview Questions:

TEACHER COLLABORATION, GOALS, MODELS

A. Teacher Collaboration Stances, Goals and Models

1. What form of collaboration do you prefer – formal meetings or informal meetings with the colleagues? Why?

2. How have your views of teacher collaboration changed over the last 5 years?

3. What, if any, specific moments/ episodes/ readings influenced your vision of teacher collaboration?

4. What do teachers do to improve their performances?

5. What would you like to see in place at your school to develop teacher collaboration?

6. Do you think there is a link between collaboration and student achievement?

7. If yes, please, describe how collaboration affects student achievement. Please, be specific.

8. If yes, please, describe how collaboration affects you as a teacher. Please, be specific.

9. In your opinion, what factors facilitate collaboration with colleagues? Please, provide examples.

10. In your opinion, what factors hinder collaboration with colleagues? Please, provide examples.

11. Can you describe a critical teaching or learning incident that you feel encapsulates you as a teacher or learner?

12. Do you think teacher collaboration boosts self-esteem and confidence which results in improved performance?
B. General Description of Teaching

1. How satisfied are you with your teaching so far? Choose from:
   a. very satisfied
   b. satisfied
   c. not satisfied
   d. not at all satisfied

2. How do your prior experiences (in school or out of school) have shaped who you are as a teacher?

3. In what ways do you think factors such as your ethnicity, gender, socio-economic background, religion, age, dialect, accent, etc. influence any aspects of your teaching? Please, make examples.

4. What do you consider as your greatest personal challenge in your teaching?

5. When you are talking informally about your work (with colleagues or others) what are some of the aspects that come up in the conversations?

6. Describe very briefly what teacher collaboration is for you.

7. What is, in your opinion, the main purpose of teacher collaboration?

8. Are you involved in any collaborative meetings, workshops, activities, programs, etc. inside of the school? If so, what? If no, why not? Would you like to be involved in such an activity in the future? Why?