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Special And General Education Partners Co-Teaching Through The Structural Lens Of Complexity Theory

Shirley Ann Johnson

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SPECIAL AND GENERAL EDUCATION PARTNERS CO-TEACHING THROUGH THE STRUCTURAL LENS OF COMPLEXITY THEORY

by

Shirley A. Johnson
Master of Science, Minnesota State University Moorhead, 1995
Bachelor of Science, Minnesota State University Moorhead, 1984

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the
University of North Dakota
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Grand Forks, North Dakota
December
2017
This dissertation, submitted by Shirley A. Johnson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

___________________________
Kari Chiasson, Ed.D., Co-Chairperson

___________________________
Patti Mahar, Ph.D., Co-Chairperson

___________________________
Kathy Smart, Ed.D

___________________________
Pauline Stonehouse, Ph.D.

This dissertation is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the School of Graduate Studies of the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.

___________________________
Grant McGimpsey
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

___________________________
Date
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Title               Special and General Education Partners Co-teaching through the Structural Lens of Complexity Theory

Department         Teaching & Learning

Degree             Doctor of Philosophy

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Shirley A. Johnson
December 2017
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What I have learned is, all great changes are preceded by chaos – our lives depend on change to keep us moving forward. For me, this entailed fulfilling the dream of earning a Ph.D. I am so thankful for everyone who played a part in this incredible dream.

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To my kids, Maxwell, Weston, Kendall and Carter …you’re my favorite work of art.
ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is one of the most complex and demanding reforms in schools today. How school systems are structured may account for the many difficulties schools are having in strengthening, sustaining, and expanding inclusive education. Co-teaching is an instructional delivery method that offers a promising practice towards successful inclusive education. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the perspectives of co-teachers actively engaged in expanding the practice of co-teaching to help leaders strengthen, sustain, and expand effective inclusive education for students with disabilities.

Complexity theory provided the theoretical framework to explore how the co-teachers interacted and self-organized when faced with the complex phenomenon of improving and sustaining inclusive education in a school system. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with thirteen participants. The following four textural themes emerged: (a) participants believed in the philosophy of inclusive education, (b) participants experienced personal and professional growth, (c) quality of instruction improved as the result of co-teaching, and (d) participants perceived relationships were key to their success as co-teachers. The following three structural elements needed to strengthen, sustain, and expand inclusive education merged: (a) improved communication, (b) administrative support, and (c) administrative commitment. These
themes are discussed and examined for the implication they hold for school personnel who are developing successful, sustainable, inclusive programs.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classrooms started over 40 years ago with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, P.L. 94-142). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, now referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), guarantees the right of all individuals with disabilities to be educated in the least restrictive environment. The instructional practice of inclusive education grew out of the philosophy that students with disabilities deserve the right to be educated in the general education setting (Murawski & Lochner, 2011). Falvey, Givner, and Kimm (1995) stated:

Inclusive education is about embracing all, making a commitment to do whatever it takes to provide each student in the community—and each citizen in a democracy—an inalienable right to belong, not to be excluded. Inclusion assumes that living and learning together is a better way that benefits everyone, not just children who are labeled as having a difference. (p. 8)

The reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 strengthened inclusive education by requiring that students with disabilities are provided equal access to not only the general education classroom but also emphasized the importance of access to grade level curriculum. The emphasis on inclusive education was further intensified with the reauthorization of IDEA (renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), P.L.
108-446) in 2004. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act was reauthorized to align with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, at that time referred to as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). These laws mandated increased accountability for all learners as well as required reporting on yearly achievement outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities. Although these mandates have compelled public schools towards expanding inclusive education, the promise of equity and excellence in addressing the needs of students with disabilities in the general education setting is still a national concern (Kozleski, Artiles, & Waitoller, 2013).

While the concept of inclusive education is based on old and established values of mainstreaming and integration, the use of ‘inclusive’ language (i.e., inclusion and inclusive education) is relatively new (Sailor & McCart, 2014). Within professional literature, references to inclusive education may relate to including children with disabilities in general education settings, but also may refer to the inclusion of students with different ethnic or language backgrounds. For this study, inclusive education is defined as students with disabilities having equal access to general education classrooms that are safe, challenging, and contribute to enhancing the quality of life for individuals with disabilities (Mitchell, 2015). There are several basic assumptions within this study pertaining to inclusive education. First, inclusive education is a civil right and a socially just practice (Danforth & Naraian, 2015). Second, inclusive education is a “process that is always ongoing, continual, and by extension, unfinished” (Danforth & Naraian, 2015, p. 72). Lastly, inclusive education is an instructional practice responding to students’ individualized needs and not merely the placement of learners with disabilities in the general education setting. Sailor and McCart (2014) explained, “Inclusive education is
vastly more complex than simply placing students with disabilities or increasing their percentages of time in the general education classroom” (p. 60).

The research on inclusive education provides compelling evidence of academic, behavioral, and social gains for students with disabilities (Copland & Cosbey, 2008; Cosier, Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2013; McDonnell, Thorson, Disher, Mathot-Buckner, Mendel, & Ray, 2003). Cosier (2010) in a study exploring the relationship between inclusive education and achievement found hours in general education was significantly related to reading and mathematics achievement for students (1300 students between the ages of six and nine years from 180 school districts) across all disability categories. The results indicated that reading and math scores increased approximately half a point for each hour students with disabilities spent in the general education setting (Cosier, 2010; Cosier et al., 2013). Further, inclusive education creates a climate of belonging in which students with disabilities report feeling more valued and respected (Theoharis & Causton, 2014; Villa & Thousand, 2016). The Institute on Community Integration at the University of Minnesota (n.d.) in their decades of research reveal inclusive education provides: (a) greater preparation for adult living, (b) improved learning for all students, (c) increased acceptance and value of diversity, (d) growth of non-disabled peers, (e) increased friendship development, and (f) supports civil rights. Consequently, “it is of great importance to maximize access to general education for all students with disabilities,” (Theoharis & Causton, 2014, p. 82). From the civil rights perspective, every child has the right to be educated in the general education classroom. From the educational outcome perspective, students with disabilities educated in the general education classroom show greater academic learning and social-emotional
learning. This study supported the need to better understand factors that may lead to strengthening, sustaining, and expanding the practice of co-teaching as a means to deliver services for students with disabilities in inclusive environments.

**Statement of the Problem**

Despite evidence of a paradigm shift within public schools towards increased inclusive education and research suggesting the benefits of inclusive education (Cosier et al., 2013), strengthening, sustaining, and expanding existing inclusive education for students with disabilities continues to be a challenge (Kugelmass, 2006). Implementing and sustaining inclusive education is one of the most complex and demanding reforms in schools today (McLeskey & Waldron, 2006; Sindelar, Shearer, Yendol-Hoppey & Liebert, 2006). For the past three decades, experts in the field of special education have identified best practices that lead to effective inclusive education (Cosier et al., 2013; McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014; Sailor & McCart, 2014; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013). Key strategies emerge from inclusive education literature to support schools to be more inclusive. These strategies include:

- Special and general education teachers are engaging in co-teaching (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010; Isherwood & Barger-Anderson, 2008; McLeskey & Waldron, 2015; Navarro, Zervas, Gesa, & Sampson, 2016).
- Special and general education teachers collaborating and co-planning (Embury & Dinnesen, 2013; Nierengarten, 2013).
- Inclusive educators are sharing common beliefs, values, and philosophies (Carter, Prater, Jackson, & Marchant, 2009; Isherwood & Barger-Anderson, 2008; Lindeman & Magiera, 2014).

- Special and general education teachers using differentiated and research-based instruction (McLeskey et al., 2014; Navarro et al., 2016; Petersen, 2016; Shogren et al., 2015; Shoulders & Krei, 2016; Walsh, 2012).

- Co-teachers engaging in ongoing high-quality professional development (Cooper, Kurtts, Baber, & Vallecorsa, 2008; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

The recommendations found in literature have provided helpful information for schools executing inclusive education, however making education inclusive is more difficult than many expected (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011).

Although the suggested practices listed above have resulted in improved academic and behavioral outcomes for students with disabilities, these practices in isolation have not resulted in systematic changes needed to support and sustain inclusive education (Kugelmass, 2006; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Little is known about how to strengthen inclusive education over time, how to promote wider-scale adoption, or what factors influence the sustainability of inclusive education within a system such as a school (McLeskey et al., 2014; Sindelar et al., 2006). All too common, K-12 schools have isolated efforts of co-teaching operating as independent “silos” within the school system. For example, Danforth (2014) described these efforts as “small bands of ambitious, progressive educators who want to change the world” (p. 159). Difficulties are intensified when school districts become reliant on these fragmented programs and the concentrated efforts of a limited number of the participants (e.g., a small group of teachers, a single administrator, or an isolated classroom within a school district) to sustain inclusive
education (Smith & Bell, 2015). Likewise, top-down reforms driven by the administration that lack collaboration and interaction among teachers often leads to schools inadequately implementing and sustaining of inclusive education (Sailor & McCart, 2014). Findings revealed that top-down reforms actually weaken the innovative capacity of a school and do not support the “personal and professional growth necessary for teachers to become effective inclusive educators” (Danforth, 2014, p. 317).

Strengthening, sustaining, and expanding existing inclusive education practices for students with disabilities seems to be a challenge that has not yet been accomplished in many school districts (McKeskey, Hoppey, Williamson, & Rentz, 2004; McKeskey et al., 2014). Consequently, for school districts to move toward effective and sustainable inclusive education, leaders need to involve teachers in a bottom-up (Davis & Sumara, 2006) system-wide decision making and collaborative approach that values the input of all persons (Danforth, 2014; McMaster, 2013).

**Personal Experience of Inclusive Education**

Although the researched best practices (e.g., co-teaching, professional development, co-planning) found in inclusive education literature are essential to inclusive classrooms, the practices alone are not sufficient to strengthen, sustain, and expand inclusive education (Kugelmass, 2006; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Based on my 30-year career as a special education professional, I can verify the challenges involved in successfully implementing and sustaining inclusive education in schools. I have been professionally involved in the field of special education for several decades in the capacity of a teacher, university supervisor, university instructor, mentor, and instructional coach. Through my personal and professional experiences, I have witnessed
school personnel in several districts work hard to meet the challenges of effective and sustainable inclusive education. My lifelong commitment to advocacy to the equal access and rights for individuals with disabilities originates my earnest interest in this research.

As inclusive education literature implies, implementing and sustaining inclusive education is one of the most complex and demanding reforms in schools today, such is the case for the school district of the study. The study was conducted in a school district located in the upper Midwest. The school district is located in a town with a population of approximately 40,000 people. I became familiar with the school district as a resident of the community, and a parent of children enrolled in the district.

Beginning in the early 1990’s and driven by mandates of IDEA, special education teachers within the district began spearheading initiatives to educate students with disabilities in the general education setting. During this time, I witnessed early efforts of inclusive education on a very small scale in several elementary schools. General and special education teachers developed co-teaching partnerships and began co-teaching for one or two classes. As a result, several innovative, co-teaching partnerships were developed, and effective inclusive education practices were used by the teachers. Unfortunately, over time the co-teaching partnerships diminished in the elementary schools, again due to personnel reassignments within the district.

Fast forward to the early 2000’s, administrators in the district spearheaded an inclusive education initiative on a larger scale at the high school, at that time the school was undergoing construction to add a new ninth-grade addition. The ninth-grade addition was constructed to have three wings, each accommodating four core general education teachers and two special education teachers with the intentions of supporting co-teaching.
The design supported teachers within the wings to have common preparation and planning time. Professional development was offered, and several co-teachers attended a series of workshops, but no follow-up was provided. The ninth grade operated within this co-teaching platform for over five years with success documented (e.g., increased attendance of students with disabilities, parental satisfaction, and positive student outcomes) by special education staff (personal communication, 2017). After several years, the co-teaching model expanded to other grade levels within the high school. Despite evidence of successful inclusive education practices documented by special education staff, the practice of co-teaching gradually declined until very little evidence of co-teaching presently remains. The lack of sustainability was due to changes in administration and teaching staff and lack of resources to sustain the co-teaching and collaborative model at the high school (personal communication, 2017).

The district also adapted Inclusive education in the middle school. Like the high school, inclusive education at the middle school originated around the time the district built a new middle school building. The design of the middle school included three separate classroom areas for each grade level called houses. Within each house, designated areas were designed to accommodate collaboration amongst general education teachers and special education teachers with the intention to support co-teaching practices. The district supported co-teaching by providing common preparation and planning time and opportunities for professional development. Once again, the co-teaching model within the school district was short lived. Several years after the initial implementation at the middle school, the co-teaching model decreased due to budget shortfalls, lack of resources and support for co-teaching.
At the start of the 2016-2017 school year, the district’s administrators implemented a new model of inclusive education at the middle school building. The need for the district’s improved inclusive education model manifested itself in (a) low numbers of students with disabilities receiving services in the general education classrooms and (b) the administrators’ dissatisfaction with the district’s inclusive education (personal communication, 2017). The purpose of the new inclusion model was to effectively implement co-teaching to improve student outcomes for students with disabilities in the general education setting. The initiative included goals designed to improve collaboration and co-teaching strategies to strengthen, sustain, and promote wider-scale adoption of inclusive education within the school district.

The new inclusion model at the middle school encompassed several components to begin at the start of the 2016-2017 school year. First, special education teachers were assigned general education co-teaching partners based on content area. Second, co-teachers were asked to increase the use of established co-teaching strategies and differentiated instruction in the inclusive classrooms. Third, two hours of collaboration and planning time was provided each month to co-teachers. Lastly, the school employed two instructional coaches to guide the process. At the start of the school year, and consequently, the start of the new inclusion model, I was employed by the school district as one of the instructional coaches.

This phenomenological study investigated how the special education teachers and general education teachers engaged in co-teaching at the middle school experienced the journey towards improved inclusive education during the 2016-2017 school year. In addition, the study investigated co-teachers’ (general education teachers and special
education teachers) perceptions of what structural elements within a school system are considered necessary to strengthen, sustain, and expand co-teaching practices.

**Need for the Study**

Although the literature has identified effective practices that support inclusive education, the way in which school systems are structured may account for many of the difficulties schools are having in strengthening, sustaining, and expanding inclusive education (Sakiz, 2016). Developing a deeper understanding of needed structural elements of effective inclusive education needs a heterarchical approach viewing a school as a system of organization where the elements are equal (Danworth, 2014). There is limited research that focuses on a school as a system and what structural elements are needed to strengthen, sustain, and expand existing inclusive education (Sailor & McCart, 2014; Sindelar et al., 2006). This research supported the need by examining the perspectives of co-teachers (general education teachers and special education teachers) actively engaged in expanding the practice of co-teaching within a school system. Analysis of participants’ perspectives of their experiences co-teaching provided a description of structural elements participants believed critical to strengthening, sustaining, and expanding inclusive education within a school system.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to explore the perspectives of co-teachers (general education teachers and special education teachers) engaged in expanding the practice of co-teaching to help leaders strengthen, sustain, and expand effective inclusive education for students with disabilities. The benefits of inclusive education provide compelling evidence of improvements in social skills, academic growth, and behavior for students

**Theoretical Framework**

Complexity theory provided the theoretical framework to explore the complexity of co-teaching in a middle school. Complexity theory, “a theory of survival, evolution, development, and adaptation” (Morrison, 2002, p. 6), provided the foundation to explore how a complex system such as a public school was able to change, develop, and evolve towards greater inclusive education (Mason, 2008; Morrison, 2008). The components of complexity theory are illustrated in Figure 1.

![Complexity Theory Diagram](image)

**Figure 1. Components of Complexity Theory. (Adapted from Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011)**

Since the focus of complexity theory is on observing and describing how adaptive systems self-organize and self-maintain (Davis & Sumara, 2006; Mason, 2008; Morrison, 2008; Snyder, 2013), the principles of complexity theory served as the framework to describe and explain how co-teachers interacted and self-organized when faced with a
complex phenomenon of improving and sustaining inclusive education (Radford, 2006).

Kuhn (2008) added:

> Complexity and education may be brought together because in the language of complexity, such as human cultural settings, productions and institutions as educational endeavor are complex and dynamic. Individual human beings (learners, educators, and administrators), various associations of individuals (classes, schools, universities, educational associations) and human endeavor (such as educational research) are multi-dimensional, non-linear, interconnect, far from equilibrium and unpredictable (p. 182).

The theoretical framework of complexity theory drove all aspects of the study including the development of the research questions, participant selection, data collection, and eventually, analysis of data. Two assumptions set forth by the complexity perspective guided this study; inclusive education is a complex phenomenon and schools function as a complex system (i.e., the middle school of the study).

**Inclusive Education is a Complex Phenomenon**

Central to the study, complexity theory identified inclusive education as a complex phenomenon such that it is influenced by many sets of rules and players, no clear cause and effect can be determined, and uncertainty of outcomes exist (Glouberman & Zimmerman, 2002; Mason, 2008; Morrison, 2008). In other words, inclusive education encompasses teaching students with the multiplicity of academic, behavioral and emotional needs with diverse backgrounds, influenced by teacher individualism, school system procedures and initiatives further complicated by pressures of accountability. Glouberman and Zimmerman (2002) described the differences between simple,
complicated and complex phenomenon (see Table 1). Kozleski, Yu, Satter, Francis, and Haines (2015) describe inclusive education as “developing the capacity of whole schools to work together to solve the complex and unique challenges that students with learning differences pose” (p. 223). Recognizing the complexity of inclusive education as unique is of “immense importance” to educational research (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 11) because the choice of research methodology should begin by acknowledging that “human settings and activities are necessarily complex” (Kuhn, 2008, p. 183).

Table 1. Explanation of Simple, Complicated, and Complex Phenomena.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Following a Recipe</th>
<th>Sending a Rocket to the Moon</th>
<th>Inclusive Education Complex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple</td>
<td>Procedures are critical and necessary</td>
<td>Influenced by many sets of factors, no clear cause and effect, emergent properties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The recipe is essential</td>
<td>Sending one rocket increases assurance that the next will be OK</td>
<td>Educating one child with disabilities provides experience but no assurance of success when educating another child with disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipes are tested to assure easy replication</td>
<td>Rockets are similar in critical ways</td>
<td>Every child with disabilities is unique and must be understood as an individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipes produce standardized products</td>
<td>There is a high degree of certainty of outcome</td>
<td>Uncertainty and unpredictability of outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The best recipes give good results every time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from Glouberman & Zimmerman, 2002

School Function as a Complex System

Second, complexity theory provided the framework to understand how the middle school in the study functions as a complex system (Mason, 2008; Richardson & Cilliers; 2001). Within complexity theory literature, a complex system is characterized by five key
aspects: (a) formed by initial conditions or boundaries and made up of large numbers of identities that connect and interact in many different ways (Mason, 2008; Radford, 2006); (b) interactions are dynamic, non-linear, unpredictable, short range, and diverse (Morrison, 2008); (c) disequilibrium is necessary and not an undesirable state (Morrison, 2008; Snyder, 2013); (d) ability to change, grow, and learn (Morrison, 2008); and (e) ability to self-organize, new structures and behaviors emerge as identities act and react to each other (Snyder, 2013). Refer to Table 2 for detailed descriptors illustrating a school as a complex system. Radford (2006) further explained, “Schools are thus seen as organizations consisting of multiple interconnecting elements, continuously evolving in an unpredictable environment that itself consist of multiplicity of further elements” (p. 184).

Building on the above descriptions depicting inclusive education (educating a child with disabilities in an inclusive environment) as a complex phenomenon and public school as a complex system, complexity theory offered important principles when examining how co-teachers adapted and self-organized to respond to the changing conditions of inclusive education.
Table 2. Middle School as a Complex Adaptive System (Mason, 2008; Morrison, 2008; Radford, 2006; Snyder, 2013).

<table>
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<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Descriptors</th>
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<tr>
<td>Open system with initial conditions or boundaries, made up of nested levels</td>
<td>Open school systems intersect with a large number of elements (students, teachers, families, administrators) that interact and connect in dynamic ways and continuously exchanging information. To function, school systems operate on multiple levels simultaneously. The system behaves as a “whole” resulting from interactions of parts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple interactions that are non-linear, unpredictable, short range, and diverse</td>
<td>School systems contain multiple variables that connect and interact, continuously exchanging information by means of communication, interaction and connectedness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic and far from equilibrium</td>
<td>A school system is never standing still, constant flow of interactions and information keeps a school interacting in a dynamic way, and is operating in a constant state of disequilibrium. Disequilibrium is maintained by the constant flow of information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive, ability to change, grow, and learn through feedback loops</td>
<td>There are many direct and indirect feedback loops; feedback loops are necessary to move teachers and administration closer to desired change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-organization, state of emergence</td>
<td>New behaviors emerge through interactions at multiple levels. All are interdependent for the survival of the school as a whole.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examining the Complexity of Inclusive Education

There is an accumulation of literature connecting complexity theory to educational reform and change (Davis & Sumara, 2010; Kuhn, 2008; Lemke & Sabelli, 2008; Mason, 2008; Morrison, 2010; Radford, 2006; Wood & Butt, 2014). According to Kuhn (2008), the use of complexity theory in educational research is advantageous as it “fosters reflection and thoughtfulness” (p. 185); what can be learned from a complexity perspective can be useful to understand the problem or issue being investigated.
Drawing on key principles of complexity theory: (a) the behaviors of complex systems are constituted through *relationships* (b) given a significant degree of complexity, new behaviors *emerge*, and (c) *feedback* loops serve as drivers for change (Cilliars, 2000; Mason, 2008; Morrison, 2010; Snyder, 2013) the study focused on emergent structural elements needed to strengthen, sustain, and expand inclusive education. In addition, complexity theory argues for a multi-directional approach (Kuhn, 2008; Radford, 2006), therefore, looking for just one cause and effect explanation were unsuited for the study (Mason, 2008; Morrison, 2008) because the influences on inclusive education are many and massively interwoven.

As Snyder (2013) highlighted, “If inclusive education reform is to be successful and sustainable, it needs to encompass a new lens that focuses on the complex interactions of inclusive educators within the complex system creating a wider view of the educational systems as a holistic organism” (p. 6). Radford (2006) further emphasized that relationships and interconnectedness exist within all levels of a system, “Each function in relation to others, some more closely linked, others more distant for each other, ultimately all are interdependent for the survival of the organization of a whole” (p. 184). However, Radford (2006) argued that rather than studying particular factors and correlations across many systems, it is more beneficial to study the complex interrelating factors within one system. Therefore, co-teachers at the middle school became the focus of this study. Kuhn (2008) explained:

A complexity approach acknowledges that all levels of focus, whether this is the individual class, school, national, or international associations, reveal humans and human endeavor as complex, and that focusing on one level will not reduce the
multi-dimensionality, non-linearity, interconnectedness, or unpredictability encountered (p. 183).

Lastly, because complex systems have a history (Cilliers, 2000), important questions were examined prior to the study to understand the background of inclusive education at the middle school level from which the problem of the study was based: How did the school get like this? What is the history of inclusive education in the school? Refer to figure 2 to view the level of focus for the study and to examine the complex interactions that exist within all levels of a system.

![Complexity and Nested Layers of Inclusive Education](image)

Figure 2. Illustration of Complexity and Nested Layers of Inclusive Education within a Public School. (Adapted from Davis & Sumara, 2006)

Complexity theory provided a lens for examining how co-teachers navigated amidst a new inclusion model in a middle school (Morrison, 2010). A rich descriptive analysis of the middle school’s inclusive education arose from the perspectives of co-teachers (general education teachers and special education teachers) to showcase the process of adaptation and self-organization led by relationships, connectedness, and feedback (Cilliers, 2000; Mason, 2008; Morrison, 2010). As the aim of this study was to
develop a deeper understanding of the complex phenomenon of inclusive education, the principles of complexity theory were applied to investigate systematic change within a middle school system to offer explanations and descriptions to help leaders strengthen, sustain, and expand successful inclusive education for students with disabilities.

**Benefits of the Study**

Navigating the path to inclusive education in a complex system such as a public school can present overwhelming challenges. By providing a rich description of one level of a complex system, the information gained from the study may provide a greater understanding of what structural elements are needed in schools to strengthen, sustain, and expand inclusive education. Radford (2006) further added that research “can promote the inherent self-organizational capacities of schools as adaptive and flexible institutions working within a complex society that makes multiple demands amidst continuously changing priories” (p. 178). McMaster (2013) stated, “Whole school approaches towards inclusive change can be the means to build sustainable inclusive practices and values in schools” (p. 3). The results of the study may also contribute to improved outcomes for students with disabilities receiving services in inclusive classrooms. Sailor and McCart (2014) added, “The desired result of these systemic changes would be improved services for all students with disabilities” (p. 57). Perhaps the most valuable benefit of the study was bringing the voices of the co-teachers (e.g., general education teachers, special education teachers) together to identify structural elements needed within a school system to strengthen, sustain, and expand inclusive education.
Researcher Reflexivity

In qualitative research, the researcher engages in “reflexivity” in which he or she reports any potential biases that may be brought to the study (Fischer, 2009). During the study, I was employed as a co-teaching coach facilitating the inclusive education improvement process in the middle school where the study was conducted. Further, I have worked in the field of special education for three decades, and I am deeply committed to social justice, civil rights and inclusive education for individuals with disabilities. Throughout my career, a deeply rooted passion of mine has been advocacy towards inclusive education. I believe in the human contribution and potential of individuals with disabilities. My employment and personal beliefs had the potential to create bias in the study. It was important that I exercised openness and willingness to consider new ideas and opportunities throughout the study. Olausson, Ekebergh, and Österberg (2014) described this openness as, “A genuine will to understand the phenomenon in a new way” (p. 127).

During data analysis, it was important to bracket (i.e., eпоche) myself out of the study by disclosing my personal experiences as a special educator for thirty plus years. In the eпоche process, prior understandings and judgements are set aside so the phenomena can be viewed from a new vantage point (Moustakas, 1994). This allowed me to divulge my personal experiences in inclusive education, to allow the voices of the participants to emerge authentically (Creswell, 2013). Consequently, by focusing less on my experiences, I was able to view the phenomenon (e.g., lived experiences of the teachers co-teaching) with a fresh perspective.
According to Patton (1990), the credibility of the researcher is especially important in qualitative research as it is the researcher who is the major instrument of data collection and analysis. I have specialized training in inclusive education particularly training co-teachers to work effectively in inclusive classrooms. I have co-taught in inclusive classrooms and have experienced the challenges of implementing, improving, and sustaining inclusive education. Creswell (1998) stated, “Knowing some common experiences can be valuable for groups such as therapists, teachers, health professionals and policymakers” (p. 82). I have committed to these practices throughout my career because I consider inclusive education both a civil right and a matter of social justice for individuals with disabilities.

I am aware my experiences and beliefs towards inclusive education had great potential to create bias within the study. To minimize bias, I was careful to make attempts not to influence the co-teachers’ understandings and perspectives of the new inclusion model. As a researcher, I consistently needed to remind myself the purpose of the study was to capture the perspectives of the co-teachers, not to promote my personal position related to the value of inclusive education.

**Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study:

1. How do co-teachers (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceive and describe their co-teaching experience in a middle school inclusive classrooms?
2. What are the middle school co-teachers’ (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceptions of structural elements are critical to strengthen, sustain, and expand inclusive education?

**Delimitations**

This study was limited to co-teachers from one middle school in a Midwest state. Only educators involved in co-teaching were asked to participate. Families of students with disabilities, students or community members were not asked to participate in the study. It was assumed the co-teachers were honest, open, and willing to share their experiences related to co-teaching. The study was limited to co-teachers’ experiences related to one school district. Finally, my professional stance towards inclusive education, biases, and positioning posed the possibility to influence the inclusive education process.

**Definitions**

Definitions are provided for the reader for clarification and deeper understanding of the intent study. The definitions will serve as a guide for the reader throughout the study.

*Complexity Theory*: variations in terminology found in complexity literature include, “complexity theory”, “complexity thinking”, “complexity science”, “complexity research”, as well as coupled with “critical realism”, “system theory”, and “dynamic system theory”.

*Educational Reform*: Planned changes in a way a school or school system functions, from teaching methodologies to administrative processes.

*Inclusive Education*: The education of students with disabilities in age-appropriate general education classrooms with high-quality instruction, interventions and
supports so they can be successful in the core curriculum. Friend et al., (2010) define inclusive education as, “The philosophical belief system of welcoming all students into the learning community” (p. 15).

**Co-planning:** Special and general education teachers, including related service providers, plan on a weekly basis about upcoming lesson units and assessments. (Causton & Tracy-Bronson, 2015)

**Co-teachers:** For this study, co-teachers will be limited to school personnel involved in the inclusive education reform efforts of one school year.

**Community Building and Culture** – Inclusive classrooms are ones that everyone feels accepted and that they belong. Classrooms that help all students feel welcomed and connected are part of a culture that embraces diversity and difference. (Causton & Tracy-Bronson, 2015)

**Structural elements:** In terms of understanding a system’s general characteristics, common rules, societal parameters (i.e., at the level of a building - structure can be time and space, at the level of a teacher - structure can be preferences, interests, teaching style, student grouping).

**System-wide:** For this study, system wide will be referred to as an organized interrelated structure (e.g., a school district or a school building).
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, the spirit of inclusive education has inspired policy-makers to instigate educational reforms to meet the needs of students with disabilities in inclusive settings. Friend et al. (2010) provided a comprehensive definition of inclusive education as, “The philosophical belief system of welcoming all students into the learning community” (p. 15). Villa and Thousand (2016) further defined inclusive education as:

The vision and practice of welcoming, valuing, empowering, and supporting the diverse academic, social/emotional, language, and communication learning of all students in shared environments and experiences for the purpose of attaining the desired goals of education. Inclusion is the belief that everyone belongs, regardless of need or perceived ability, and that all are valued and contributing members of the school community (p. 18).

Inclusive classrooms are described as, “Classrooms in which a heterogeneous group of students are learning together and achieve valued success” (Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012, p. 1000). In inclusive classrooms, the teachers consider students with disabilities full members of the general education classroom, educators (both special education teachers and general education teachers) are jointly responsible for students, and all students are valued and achieve success (Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012). This literature review will demonstrate the complexity of strengthening and sustaining effective inclusive education.
of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The chapter includes a brief history of inclusive education, components of effective inclusive education, and current literature related to strengthening, sustaining, and expanding inclusive education. It will conclude with an examination of inclusive education reform in public schools.

**From Exclusion to Inclusion**

Providing individuals with disabilities quality education is “nothing less than the disability rights movement occurring in the public schools” (Danforth, 2014, p. 45). As inclusive education is put into practice today in schools, educators and administrators rely on the lessons learned from past historical movements of disabled citizens seeking equality and dignity. Inclusive education supports the philosophy that students with disabilities deserve the right to be educated in the general education classrooms.

**Brown v. Board of Education**

It was not until 1954 that segregation was ruled unconstitutional with the landmark case, *Brown vs. Board of Education*. As the result of this landmark case, states were required to comply with the desegregation policy that separate was not equal. Building on the momentum of the civil rights movement and *Brown vs. Board of Education*, parents and advocacy groups seized the opportunity to seek litigation mandating that children with disabilities receive free education in the public schools (Boroson, 2017; Conroy, Yell, Katsiyannis, & Collins, 2010; Friend, 2008).

**Landmark Court Decisions**

Several momentous court decisions further advanced the educational opportunities for individuals with disabilities. The court cases, Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children vs. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1971) and Mills vs. Board of
Education of the District of Columbia (1972), served as a catalyst for change and established it was the responsibilities of public schools to provide education for children with disabilities (Yell, 2016). Prior to this time, it was not uncommon for children with disabilities to remain at home (only one in five children with disabilities were educated in public schools in the 1970’s) or were institutionalized (approximately 200,000 persons with significant disabilities were housed in state institutions) (U.S Department of Education, 2010).

**Civil Rights Law Section 504**

Several years later, the passing of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 completely changed the direction of federal disability policies. Section 504 prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities in programs that received federal financial assistance. Danforth (2014) explained, “For the first time ever, the federal government took decisive action to stop discrimination against persons with disabilities in the many organizations and agencies using federal money” (p. 58). Section 504 served as the basis for prohibiting exclusion by extending the rights of individuals with disabilities. The law prevents discrimination in all programs that receive public funding including public schools. Section 504 stated:

No otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States…shall solely by reason of his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any activity receiving federal financial assistance. (Yell, 2016, p. 41)

Section 504 states that schools must provide appropriate educational services to children protected by Section 504 and ensure that discrimination does not take place (Yell, 2016).
Further, schools are required to educate students with disabilities along with their age-appropriate peers to the maximum extent appropriate (Yell, 2016). The inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom was beginning to materialize.

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**

In 1975 Congress passed The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, P.L. 94-142) mandating that schools provided individualized or special education for children with disabilities. The law was most significant because it provided more than one million children with disabilities access to an appropriate education who had only limited access or who had been excluded entirely prior to IDEA (U.S Department of Education, 2010). Public schools could no longer choose whether to educate a student with disabilities, but rather it became a question of how to educate students with disabilities in the public school. Thus, marking the beginning of inclusive education in which everyone belongs in public schools. The law outlined several guiding principles: (a) least restrictive environment; (2) free appropriate public education; (3) individualized educational plan; (4) non-discriminatory evaluations; and (4) assured parental rights and procedural safeguards.

To achieve the goal of providing access to the general education curriculum for individuals with disabilities, PL 94-142 has been strengthened through several reauthorizations. In 1990, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was renamed Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and supported the use of “people first” language (e.g., students with learning disabilities rather than learning disabled student).
The reauthorized of IDEA in 1997 added significant changes to the IEP process and mandated that states include students with exceptionalities in all state academic assessments (Yell, 2016). The 1997 reauthorization further strengthened the goal towards greater inclusive education. The 1997 revision specifically supported inclusionary practices mandating students with disabilities are exposed to: (1) higher expectations, (2) access to general education curriculum, and (3) state assessments. The 1997 revision encouraged families and teachers to work together for the benefit of the student. Before this time, students with disabilities did not take state standardized test. Consequently, this mandate put pressure on school districts to raise the academic scores of students with disabilities. All teachers, schools, and school districts were now equally accountable for the academic achievement of individuals with disabilities (Yell, 2016).

The most recent IDEA reauthorization of 2004, renamed the law to Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), was linked specifically with the goals of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Yell, 2016). The reauthorization held schools accountable to the progress of students with disabilities on state standardized assessments. In addition, the new mandates of NCLB and IDEIA required schools to use evidence-based practices and state core standards when teaching and assessing for student outcomes. Although the 2004 revision of IDEIA did not specifically mandate students with disabilities are taught in inclusive classrooms, the reauthorization emphasized high expectations and ensured access to the general education classroom and curriculum to the maximum extent possible (Yell, 2016). Also, the 2004 revisions of IDEIA stated students with disabilities do not have to be functioning at or near grade level for the general education classroom to be considered the least restrictive
environment (Rebhorn & Smith, 2008). Although the signing of these federal laws guarantees students with disabilities the right to an education that is accessible, free, appropriate, nondiscriminatory, meaningful, and provided in the least restrictive environment, long-standing assumptions and biases of inclusive education still exist (Boroson, 2017).

**Inclusive Education Rising**

Over the past three decades, the numbers of students with disabilities educated in general education classrooms have increased. In the past 35 years, classrooms have become more inclusive and significant progress has been made toward protecting individual rights, meeting individual needs, and improving educational outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Since 1975, policies and practices that meaningfully include students with disabilities in general education classrooms and accountability systems have proliferated.

In 1990, only 34% of students with mild disabilities spent most of their school day in the general education classroom. It is reported that by the mid-2000, access increased to 65% of students with mild disabilities educated in the general education classrooms for the majority of the school day (McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2012). From 2005 through 2014, the percentage of students between ages six through twenty-one receiving special education services in the regular classroom 80% or more of the day, increased from 53.6 percent to 62.6 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In the latest analysis, 81.2% students with disabilities spend more than 40% of their day in the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). However, in practice, inclusive education remains a challenge. Ironically, many
teachers today still perceive inclusive education as a “change that hit their classrooms overnight” (Danworth, 2014, p. 3).

**Benefits of Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education is based on the premise that every child is valued equally and deserves the same opportunities and experiences as their peers. Inclusive education benefits students with disabilities as the stigma of being removed from the classroom is reduced. As students with disabilities are integrated socially with their peers, students develop friendships, feel valued, and achieve greater success. The benefits of providing inclusive education are shown by students with disabilities, students without disabilities and professionals working in inclusive settings.

**Benefits for Students with Disabilities**

Given the right supports, students with disabilities demonstrate academic growth and improvements in social and behavior skills (Feldman et al., 2015; Hoppey, 2016; Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015; Walsh, 2012) when educated in the general education setting. Students with disabilities who received services in the general education setting outperformed their peers that were educated in separate settings, have fewer absences, and reported receiving more instructional time (Blackorby, Wagner, Camero, Levine, Newman, Marder, Sumi, Chorost, Garza, & Guzman, 2005). More recently, Cosier (2010) examined a national database of over 1300 students with disabilities within 180 school districts and found that for every additional hour students with disabilities spent in the general education setting, there was a significant gain of achievement across all disability categories. Waldron, Cole, and Majd (2001) in a two-year study found that students with learning disabilities made greater progress in general education classes
compared to peers educated in traditional special education settings. Conderman and Hedin (2015, p. 350) listed potential benefits for students with emotional/behavioral difficulties educated in inclusive classrooms but advantages may apply to other disability areas as well:

- Smaller teacher-student ratio
- Opportunities to receive immediate assistance
- Opportunities to receive individualized attention
- Provides a supported transition from self-contained class to general education classroom
- Access to rigorous general education curriculum
- Exposure to peers without disabilities
- Opportunities to apply academic and behavioral strategies in inclusive environment
- Exposure to more than one teaching method or approach
- Opportunities to learn from different teacher personalities
- Opportunities to receive immediate feedback
- Opportunities to apply academic, behavioral, and social goals within general education context
- Choices of activities matched to interest and/or learning preference
- Instruction matched to skill or knowledge level
- Method of assessment matched to strength

In addition, Graziano and Navarrette (2012) stated inclusive education is advantageous because it better meets the needs of students with disabilities through smaller student-to-
teacher ratio and more individualized support and attention. Although the benefits listed above may occur across other settings, inclusive classrooms in which two professionals are co-teaching may increase the likelihood of these practices to occur.

One of the most obvious advantages of inclusive education is that students with disabilities are integrated socially with their peers. Fisher and Meyer (2002) compared the social and behavioral skills of forty students with severe disabilities educated in inclusive and self-contained classrooms. Students educated in the inclusive settings made significantly higher gains after a two-year period. Although students educated in self-contained settings demonstrated academic gains, the gains were not statistically significant. Likewise, McDonnell et al. (2003) in their yearlong study followed fourteen students with disabilities educated primarily in the general education setting and found all students made statistically significant improvements in their adaptive behavioral skills in addition to gains in Individual Education Plan (IEP) objectives.

Students with disabilities demonstrate positive long-term effects when educated in inclusive settings. Students demonstrate strategies that will help them succeed throughout their lives, have better post-secondary outcomes, and have higher rates of employment (Conderman & Hedin, 2014; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2006). Test, Mazzotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering, and Kohler (2009) reviewed literature examining secondary transition predictors of post-school success for student with disabilities. The results of the review determined students educated in inclusive environments was a moderate predictor of post-school success related to employments, postsecondary education, and independent living.
Benefits for Students without Disabilities

Students without disabilities also benefit when educated in inclusive classroom settings. Szumski, Smogorzewska, and Karwowski (2017) in their review and meta-analyses of forty-seven qualitative studies including over 4,000,000 students, found that the academic achievement of students without disabilities was positively affected when educated in inclusive classroom settings. In a two-year study by Waldron et al. (2001), reported that students without disabilities made comparable or greater gains in math and reading when taught in inclusive settings versus traditional classrooms where no students with disabilities were included. In addition, Hang and Rabren (2009), found the student without disabilities increased their understanding of diversity and developed appreciation, acceptance, and respect for individual differences when educated in inclusive classroom settings. Noteworthy, the educational achievement of students without disabilities are not negatively impacted by the presence of students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom (Fruth & Woods, 2015; McDonnell et al., 2003).

Benefits for Co-teachers

Teachers are recognized as key players in supporting the process leading to successful inclusive education systems (Navarro et al., 2016). As teachers embrace the new role as co-teachers in inclusive classroom settings, many benefits are reported. Inclusive education provides opportunities for professional and personal growth for co-teachers (Williams, 2014). Inclusive education literature also supports that special and general education teachers improved their pedagogy when teaching together in inclusive classroom settings (Friend & Cook, 2012; O’Rourke, 2015; Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012). Co-teaching provides increased opportunities for co-teachers to learn effective
instructional strategies and share expertise to meet the individual needs of the diverse learners.

Co-teachers collaboration skills improve as they work together to meet the needs of the learners in diverse, inclusive classrooms. Deppeler (2010) examined elementary schools involved in inclusive education reform and found co-teachers’ collaboration skills improved which positively impacted the learners in their classrooms. In a recent study, Mandel and Eiserman (2016) identified specific benefits of co-teaching to include (a) promotes teacher growth, (b) encourages risk-taking, and (c) provides emotional support to co-teachers.

**Components of Effective Inclusive Education**

Evidence indicates that progress has been made towards effectively including students with disabilities in the general education setting (McLeskey et al., 2012). Inclusive classrooms share common characteristics to effectively and jointly educate students with disabilities. Effective inclusive classrooms have educators who: (a) are engaged in co-teaching; (b) have positive relationships; (c) collaborate and co-plan; (d) share common beliefs, values, and philosophy; and (e) use differentiated instruction. Effective inclusive schools have administrators who support inclusive education and provide opportunities for professional development.

**Co-teaching**

One strategy which appears in literature in support of the movement towards inclusive education is co-teaching. Co-teaching has been suggested as a promising service delivery model for effective inclusive education (Murawski & Lochner, 2011). Co-teaching usually involves a general education teacher and one special education
teacher delivering instruction in an inclusive classroom where students with disabilities learn with their peers who have no disabilities (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). Co-teaching began as a collaborative partnership between special education teachers and general education teachers responding to legislative pressures to provide high-quality instruction for students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting (Shoulders & Krei, 2016). Murawski and Hughes (2009) defined co-teaching as, “Not an instructional strategy or technique per se; rather, it is a method by which educators can work collaboratively to deliver quality instruction” (p. 270).

The basis of effective co-teaching is parity, ensuring each teacher’s instructional contribution is equally valued (Cook & Friend, 2010). Co-teaching is “an efficient and productive use of two highly trained and knowledgeable professionals” (Nierengarten, 2013, p. 75) working together to benefit students. The responsibility for planning, instructing, and assessing is equally distributed between co-teachers in inclusive classrooms (Friend & Cook, 2012). As the intended benefits of co-teaching were to utilize two qualified teachers equally, the productive use of the special education teacher’s time and expertise must be encouraged in inclusive classroom settings (Kloo & Zigmond, 2008).

Throughout inclusive education literature, five approaches to implement co-teaching in inclusive education classrooms are often detailed. According to Cook and Friend (2010) these include: (a) one teach and one assist (one teacher is the lead teacher while the other teacher offers assistance); (b) station teaching (students are divided into two or more learning stations and teachers rotate); (c) parallel teaching (each teacher delivers instruction to half the class or different classroom groupings); (d) alternate
teaching (one teacher enhances the instruction of the other teacher); and (e) team teaching (teachers co-plan, co-teach, and co-assess and are responsible for the entire class).

Training specific to understanding the co-teaching models must take place for co-teachers to understand their usefulness (Friend et al., 2010; Stroilos & Tragoulia, 2013).

**Positive Relationships**

When co-teachers have positive working relationships, students were more likely to experience success in co-taught classroom settings (Leatherman, 2009; Stroilos & Stefanidis, 2015; Williams, 2014). Tuckman’s stages of team building (Tuckman & Jenson, 1977) describe the process of building effective co-teaching relationships. The four phases: (a) forming, (b) storming, (c) norming, (d) preforming and (e) adjourning, are necessary for the co-teachers to develop, find solutions, and work collaboratively to deliver results (Tuckman & Jenson, 1977). As co-teachers experience the process of building effective relationships, they begin by creating a partnership (forming), work together as conflicts arise (storming), develop an interpersonal relationship with co-teacher (norming), share expertise and talents (performing), and finally reach a stage of effective collaboration and communication (adjourning).

To develop an inclusive classroom, great consideration has recently been given to the emerging relationships between teachers. Keefe and Moore (2004) exploring co-teachers’ perceptions at the secondary level, found co-teachers viewed relationships as the determining factor to (a) how successful they viewed co-teaching and (b) whether they wished to continue co-teaching. Effective co-teachers’ relationships take time and commitment. Co-teachers need to learn how to collaborate and work together effectively (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016). Kozleski et al. (2015) found that sustainable, inclusive
schools necessitate strong communication and relationships between inclusive educators. Supportive relationships are critical for the transformation to an effective, inclusive school (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu, 2010)

Relationships improve when teachers understand their new roles and responsibilities as co-teachers. Inclusive education researchers found when the co-teachers understood their new roles and responsibilities, the efficacy of co-teaching was enhanced, and instruction improved significantly (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2011; Embury & Dinnesen, 2013; Shaffer & Thomas-Brown, 2015; Isherwood & Barger-Anderson, 2008; Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015). Beninghof (2016) examined co-teaching relationships and found when relationships failed it was because co-teachers did not explicitly talk about sharing roles and responsibilities. Additional researchers stated when co-teachers are provided training that included planning and implementing co-teaching models, roles, and responsibilities, the teachers reported improvements in teaching (Embry & Dinnenense, 2013; Strogilos & Tragoulia, 2013). Furthermore, researchers found that the efficacy of co-teaching was enhanced when co-teachers understood their roles to effectively plan and implement activities (Berry et al., 2011; Isherwood & Barger-Anderson, 2008; Shaffer and Thomas-Brown, 2015; Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015).

Collaborate and Co-plan

Co-teaching is an instructional practice in which general and special education teachers work collaboratively to support students with disabilities within the general education setting (Friend & Cook, 2012; Murawski & Lochner, 2011; Sileo, 2011). Friend and Cook (2012) described collaboration as, “Shared decision making as they [co-
teachers] work toward a common goal” (p. 6). Further, Rytivaara and Kershner (2012) stated collaboration as “Active involvement of both teachers in the task of instruction, and true sharing of the work is seen to be essential” (p. 1001).

Communication and collaboration skills are essential to the success of any collaborative partnership (Stivers, 2008). The literature provides evidence that co-teachers improved their instructional skills, increased the use of effective strategies, and became better teachers when they collaborated and co-planned with their co-teacher partners (Mastropieri, Scruggs, Graetz, Norland, Gardizi, & McDuffie, 2005). Murawski and Hughes (2009) conclude, “The more teachers can collaborate and share the strategies on which they have been trained in their respective fields, the more likely that students in the general classroom will truly benefit from strong research-based instruction” (p. 271). Co-teachers who communicated and collaboratively solved problems positively impacted the learning of student in the co-taught classrooms (Deppeler, 2012).

High-quality lesson planning is essential for any lesson but particularly important in co-taught lessons to ensure both teachers work collaboratively to deliver quality instruction (Mastropieri et al., 2005). Co-taught lessons should be engaging and consider the needs of every student (Moore, 2016). Co-teachers should commit to a schedule of co-planning to develop effective lessons to address the needs of the students in the co-taught classrooms (Carter et al., 2012). However, finding the time to collaborate and co-plan is a challenge for school districts. Throughout inclusive education literature, the most frequently mentioned concern for co-teachers is the need for common planning time (Dieker, 2001; Keefe & Moore, 2004).

**Common Beliefs, Values, and Philosophy**
Inclusive education can be a threatening concept for co-teachers because it forces them to confront their personal beliefs as well as biases and prejudices (Hehir & Katzman, 2012). Co-teachers need to openly communicate with each other about their beliefs, values, and philosophy prior to co-teaching (Conderman, 2011). Inclusive education researchers identified teachers’ philosophy and beliefs about instructing students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms to significantly influence the students’ success in inclusive classrooms (Carter et al., 2009; Isherwood & Barger-Anderson, 2008; Lindeman & Magiera, 2014). Documented within inclusive education literature, when co-teachers share similar philosophies students were more likely to experience success in co-taught classrooms (Leatherman, 2009; Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015; Williams, 2014). Therefore, it is important for co-teachers to examine their philosophical beliefs of why inclusion is important and a worthwhile ethical commitment. Increasing co-teachers’ knowledge towards inclusion leads to changes in attitudes and beliefs (Friend, 2008; Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016; Pancsfar & Petroff, 2013). Positive teacher attitudes lead to increased sustainability of inclusive practices (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Silvermann, 2007).

Co-teachers need to examine personal beliefs, from the prior notion of the student deficit perspective to a perspective of student ability. In the study examining co-teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive education, Sailor & Roger (2005) found changing attitudes allowed teachers to look beyond student deficits and to focus at what the student with a disability was capable of with supports. Also, inclusive education requires a shift in thinking for co-teachers (Lieberman & Miller, 2004) from “my” students [students with disabilities] to “our” students. Co-teachers must embrace the notion that the classroom, as
well as all the students, belongs to both of them and both co-teachers provide instruction “that maximizes their areas of expertise” (Murawski & Lochner, 2011, p. 176).

**Differentiated Instruction**

Inclusive schools make differentiated instruction a top priority and teachers are recognized as key players in supporting this process (Navarro, Zervas, Gesa, & Sampson, 2016). Tomlinson and McTighe (2006), experts in differentiation, suggest that for co-teachers to be successful in inclusive education, differentiated instruction needs to be implemented. Therefore, teachers need opportunities to learn high-quality instructional skills that address the diverse needs of individuals in today’s classrooms (McLeskey et al., 2014; Navarro al et., 2016; Petersen, 2016; Shogren et al., 2015; Shoulders & Krei, 2016; Walsh, 2012). Furthermore, teachers need to be educated on how to design and implement efficient curriculum modifications responding to the individual needs of students (Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015). Professional development needs to focus on improving a co-teacher’s instructional skills to assure students with disabilities are receiving research-based instruction in inclusive environments (Berry et al., 2011; Hoppey, 2016).

Differentiated instruction supports the need to address students individually and does so through a schoolwide application of response to intervention (RTI) called multitiered system of support (MTSS) (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Through varied tiers, differentiated instruction is provided to address and prevent academic and behavioral problems. MTSS provides screening, evidence-based practices and progress monitoring at multiple levels of intervention intensity for both behavior and academics. The
behavioral instruction side of MTSS is often referred to as schoolwide positive behavior interventions and support (SWPBIS) (McDaniel, Jolivette, & Ennis, 2014).

Another instructional framework to improve and enhance inclusive classrooms for all learners is universal design for learning (UDL) (CAST, 2015). UDL is an instructional framework the promotes accessibility for students with disabilities (Basham, Israel, Graden, Poth, & Winston, 2010). The CAST model for UDL has three components. The components are multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2015). Employing these strategies removes the barriers and gives students with disabilities increased access to grade level curriculum (Wilson, 2017).

Instruction should be differentiated to include flexible grouping strategies that offer greater opportunities for engagement and active participation for students with disabilities (Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015). Social participation of students with disabilities has been one of the main benefits of inclusive education. According to the study by Strogilos & Stefanidis (2015) co-teaching improved the social participation of the student with disabilities.

Pedagogical approaches to include students with disabilities are needed in co-taught classrooms. The ability to differentiate instruction requires on-going support for co-teachers. Literature on effective inclusive education indicate the need for extensive, on-going feedback to support and encourage teachers trying to differentiate instruction (Corkum, Bryson, Smith, Giffen, & Hume, 2014; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Yoon, 2001; Kennedy & Shiel, 2010; Peterson, 2016; Polly, Neale, & Pugalee, 2013).

**Administrative Support**
A supportive administration is a key component of effective inclusive education (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010; Sailor & McCart, 2014; Shogren et al., 2015). Further, Theoharis and Causton (2014) stated, “School leaders are instrumental figures in creating and carrying out a vision for inclusive schools” (p. 82). Isherwood and Barger-Anderson (2008) studied factors affecting the adaption of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms and found:

The paradigm change begins with school leaders articulating a vision of co-teaching as an organizational and instructional strategy beneficial for all students. School administration must also validate the importance of co-teaching with frequent visits to co-taught classrooms and support with successful co-teaching performance with praise and encouragement. (p. 127)

Several studies identify effective communication as essential between co-teachers and administration in improving and sustaining effective inclusive education. In a study on sustaining inclusive education, Kugelmass (2001) found communication between teachers and administration critical. Teachers should be engaged in shared decision making and that leadership “has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed” (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008, p. 27). Likewise, McLeskey and Waldron (2006) stated for inclusive education reform efforts to be sustainable, the support of the administration and the building principal is a necessary component.

The administration must be proactive to make sure effective co-teaching is taking place. Thus, Murawski and Lockner (2011) stated, “Administrators have the right to ensure that teachers are engaged in something that is substantively different from that of more traditional classrooms” (p. 175). By observing co-teachers, administrators can
verify and provide feedback to ensure co-teachers are co-planning, co-instructing and co-assessing effectively. Accountability is needed, Bryant Davis, Dieker, Pearl, and Kirkpatrick (2012) stated, “The bottom line in planning must be the accountability for implementing practices that ensure the academic and behavioral success of students with disabilities” (p. 225). Further, for co-teachers to continue to improve, administrative feedback is necessary. Murawski and Lockner (2011) stated the goal of feedback should be to improve the learning of students by “providing constructive feedback to teachers working together in inclusive classrooms” (p. 176). Lastly, by observing co-taught classrooms, the administration conveys to the co-teachers that they value inclusive education (Murawski & Lockner, 2011) and the teachers’ investment in the effort (Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010).

Classroom Environment

Inclusive educators need to create classroom communities that support the learning of all students and believe that all students can achieve (Florian, Black-Hawkins, & Rouse, 2016). The aim of co-teachers “is to create a classroom culture of acceptance, in which learning variations are the norm” (Friend, 2015, p. 21). Inclusive education literature states that when co-teachers regard students with disabilities as full members of the general education classroom, students feel valued and achieve greater success (Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012). Further, Hammond (2014) noted, “It is not enough to have a classroom free of psychological and social threats. The brain needs to be part of a caring social community to maximize its sense of well-being” (p. 47). Lastly, it is important to avoid having more than 30 percent of a general education class designated as
having students with disabilities (Murawski & Dieker, 2013; Zigmond & Magiera, 2002) to maintain the natural heterogeneity in the classroom.

**Professional Development**

As schools move towards more inclusive education practices, teacher preparedness to teach in inclusive classrooms has become increasingly important (Cooper et al., 2008). Becoming an effective inclusive educator “requires a powerful process of personal change and growth” (Danworth, 2014, p. 14). When teachers are better prepared to work in inclusive classrooms, they can contribute to the overall success of students, especially students with special needs. Consequently, high-quality professional development is of critical importance to ensure that teachers have the appropriate training and specific skills to implement and sustain inclusive education (Carter et al., 2009; Friend & Cook, 2012; Strogilos & Tragouia, 2013; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

Professional development is essential in supporting teachers to bring positive changes to inclusive education (Friend & Cook, 2012; Walsh, 2013). School districts need to provide professional development to ensure that teachers have the skills to be effective in inclusive classrooms (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007; Reinking, 2007; Sindelar, et al., 2006; Shoulders & Krei, 2016). Nishimura (2014) reviewed effective professional development for inclusive education and found:

Traditional professional methods such as *sit and get* methods have not been highly successful in providing the necessary changes in attitudes to make inclusive schooling a reality for children with disabilities. Consequently, it is essential to continue the search for new methods of professional development (p. 37).
Inclusive education literature identifies key features of effective professional development to support teachers working in inclusive classrooms. The professional development needs to be (a) individualized and customized, (b) ongoing and sustained over time, and (c) include outside expertise. The following paragraphs describe each feature in greater detail.

Professional development for inclusive education is more effective when it is individualized and designed specifically to the needs of the school (Walsh, 2012). Individualized professional development enables teachers to practice skills and has real learning opportunities meaningful in their classrooms (Domitrovich, Gest, Gill, Bierman, Garet, Welsh & Jones, 2009). Several studies indicated that when professional development was customized, on-site, driven by teachers’ needs, and teachers’ individuality was honored, (a) teachers were more receptive to new ideas, (b) the professional development was more effective in changing teacher practices, and (c) the professional development was more likely to improve student outcomes (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010; Kozleski et al., 2015; Shaffer & Thomas-Brown, 2015; Walsh, 2012). By providing professional development that is individualized and customized, teachers can practice and apply strategies to support diverse learners in inclusive settings (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

Literature on effective professional development reveals the need for extensive, on-going professional development that includes follow-up observations, consultations, and feedback to support and encourage teachers throughout the process (Corkum, Bryson, Smith, Giffen, & Hume, 2014; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Yoon, 2001; Kennedy & Shiel, 2010; Peterson, 2016; Polly, Neale, & Pugalee, 2013). For example, a
study by Pancsofar and Petroff (2013) found teachers who were part of ongoing professional development were more confident in their co-teaching practices, demonstrated higher levels of interest and held more positive attitudes about co-teaching. Furthermore, a study by Embury and Dinnesen (2013) stated, “If schools and districts want teachers to adapt co-teaching as an effective strategy for positively changing students’ outcomes in inclusive classrooms they [administration] will need to build follow-up support in co-teaching professional development” (p. 109). Ongoing professional development leads to increased confidence and ability levels and enables teachers to develop sustainable strategies to support diverse learners.

For schools to make a fundamental change to inclusive education, the literature on effective professional development supports the need to include outside expertise. Outside expertise may serve as an instructional coach, an expert on instructional strategies or to provide ongoing support throughout the process. Teachers need to hear from outside experts to be assured this is not another passing initiative (Murawski & Bernhardt, 2016). Timperley (2008) explained the importance of outside expertise as “necessary because substantive new learning requires teachers to understand new content, learn new skills, and think about their existing practice in new ways” (p. 20). Outside experts may be better equipped to challenge the status quo of the school and present co-teachers with new possibilities and supports. External expertise is crucial to support and promote this change (Timperley, 2008). Inclusive education is a complex innovation, literature points to the need for outside experts to help guide the process.
Inclusive Education Reform

Inclusive education has grown considerably in recent years as the result of research that provides rich descriptions of characteristics of effective inclusive education programs. Despite this progress, little evidence exists on how successful inclusive education programs are sustained over time and what factors influence sustainability (Sindelar et al., 2006; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Implementing and sustaining inclusive education has proven far more difficult and complex than ever imagined (McLeskey & Waldon, 2010). Examining school reform, McLeskey and Waldon (2010) identified several factors related to sustainability of inclusive education: (a) schools need to go through a process of change that involves all-inclusive educators, (b) reform must be tailored to the needs of the school, and (c) a culture of collaboration needs to be fostered.

The development and implementation of inclusive settings are highly contextual, therefore duplication to other schools may be difficult (McLeskey et al., 2014). Also, the way schools are structured and organized may account for the many of the difficulties implementing and sustaining inclusive education (Sakiz, 2016). There is no blueprint for inclusive schools and context matters, meaning one model may not be suitable for all schools (Kozleski et al., 2015). Changing the structural organization of schools towards more inclusive education requires a holistic lens that focuses on the whole school as a system.

In McMaster’s (2013) review of successful inclusive education, he found sustainable, inclusive education programs need to involve “as wide a representation of school community as possible” (p. 20). Jones, Forlin, and Gillies (2013) in their
examination of sustainable inclusive programs, identified distributed leadership as necessary to sustain school change. The authors studied two successful inclusive programs and found in each program the co-teachers were encouraged to be the agents of change. Like the above study, Jones et al. (2013) found co-teachers involved in the successful inclusive education reform shared (a) a common vision, (b) ownership of the reform, and (c) responsibility and decision making. Also, for inclusive education reform to be successful, school leaders need to be flexible in their approach, sensitive to the setting and involve co-teachers at all levels.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perspectives of general education teachers and special education teachers engaged in co-teaching to help leaders strengthen, sustain, and expand effective inclusive education for students with disabilities. Although current literature provides evidence of improved academic, social, and emotional outcomes for students with disabilities when taught in inclusive settings, strengthening, sustaining, and expanding existing inclusive education for students with disabilities is a challenge not yet met (McLeskey et al., 2014; Sindelar et al., 2006). The goal of the study was to develop a comprehensive understanding of what structural elements co-teachers’ perceive necessary to strengthen, sustain, and expand inclusive education. The voice of co-teachers was at the core of the study as their lived experiences shed light on the phenomenon. It was expected the qualitative data would lead to greater understanding of what structural elements are needed to strengthen, sustain, and expand existing inclusive education. Complexity theory provided the theoretical framework for this study (Kuhn, 2008; Mason, 2008; Morrison, 2002) and the Mousakas (1994) method of data analysis was used for the study.

Phenomenology

A phenomenological study is suited for research that seeks “to understand a phenomenon from the point of view of the lived experiences in order to be able to
discover the meaning of it” (Englander, 2012, p. 16). According to Wilson (2015), “Phenomenology can offer the possibility of understanding lived experiences in a way that other methodologies may not” (p. 40). In phenomenological research, researchers seek to discover the essence of the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Therefore, a phenomenological method was best suited to explore the perspectives of general and special educators’ experiences to develop a deeper understanding of the complex phenomenon of inclusive education. Creswell (2013) stated, “It will be important to understand these common experiences in order to develop practice or policies, or to develop deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon” (p. 81). Therefore, the voices of co-teachers (general education teachers and special education teachers) engaged in co-teaching were brought together to identify what structural elements of a middle school are perceived as necessary to strengthen, sustain, and expand inclusive education.

**Complexity Theory**

Complexity theory “offers a way of envisaging and working with a complex phenomenon” (Kuhn, 2008, p. 177) such as inclusive education. Kuhn stated:

- Complexity fosters reflection and thoughtfulness. Taking complexity as conceptual and theoretical, we engage as imaginative, creative beings in converting complexity ideas into particularities. It is the spaciousness that appeals to me. Complexity in this way does not offer research recipes, ‘tried and true’, but rather a space for thinking otherwise, for musing on a series of ‘as ifs’ (p. 185).

Within the complexity theory and education literature, individuals (special education teachers, general education teachers), classrooms, schools, and school districts are
regarded as complex systems (Radford, 2006; Cilliers, 2000; Kuhn, 2008; Lemke & Sabelli, 2008; Morrison, 2010). Complexity theory seeks to answer questions about how a system such as a public school works and how a system may change, develop, learn, and evolve (Cilliers, 2000; Kuhn, 2008; Mason, 2008; Morrison 2010). Central to complexity theory is the idea that the participants within a complex system interact and connect with each other in many ways and these interactions and relationships are responsible for the emergence of new behaviors, patterns, and phenomena (Kuhn, 2008; Mason, 2008; Morrison 2010). Also, it is important to understand disequilibrium is an inherent part of a complex system. Mason (2008) explained, “Given a sufficient degree of complexity in a particular environment, new (and to some extent unexpected) properties and behaviors emerge in that environment” (p. 33). For example, the complexity of inclusive education can be described as an inclusive classroom with students of diverse needs in which co-teachers interact to address the instructional standards of the course. However, emotional, physical, biological, and social-economical student needs emerge and may affect student outcomes. Inclusive education is further influenced by school-wide, district, and state policies. Complexity theory offers principles for describing how inclusive education functions within the middle school system. Understanding inclusive education through complexity theory may help educators strengthen, sustain, and expand inclusive education.

**Research Questions**

The research questions addressed in this study are: 1) “How do co-teachers (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceive and describe their co-teaching experiences in a middle school?” and 2) “What structural elements of a
middle school do co-teachers (general education teachers and special education teachers) engaged in co-teaching perceive as necessary to strengthen, sustain, and expand inclusive education?” This study explored the lived experiences of co-teachers engaged in co-teaching.

**Context and Participants**

**Location**

The study was conducted in a school district in the upper Midwest with an enrollment of nearly 6,500 students in grades K-12 during the 2016-2017 school year. The district's minority student population was comprised of 4.7% American Indian, 1.8% Asian, 8.4% Black, and 8.5% Hispanic. These minority groups made up 23% of the total school enrollment with Caucasian students comprising the majority of the enrollment (76.6%). Additionally, 40% of the students met Title I requirements for free or reduced-price lunch, 6.6% students were limited English proficient, and 16.7% of the student population received special education services. The school district had eight buildings: five K-5 buildings (K-5), one middle school (6-8), one senior high (9-12), and one alternative learning center (6-12).

The middle school (grades 6-8) was chosen as the location for the study because of my employment as an instructional coach. The middle school typically has an enrollment of approximately 1,400 students and, at the time of the study, employed forty-six general education teachers and fourteen special education teachers. Although it was considered to be a large middle school, the environment was designed to encourage smaller learning communities and opportunities for stronger student/teacher relationships.
For each grade level, there were three to five houses (e.g., 6A, 6B, and 6C) serving approximately 140 students per house.

**Participants**

Fifteen educators who were engaged in co-teaching at the middle school were invited to participate in the study. Of the 15 invited participants, 13 agreed to participate in the study, four were special education teachers and nine were general education teachers. Creswell (2013) recommended that in designing phenomenological studies “the participants in the study need to be carefully chosen to be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon in question, so that the researcher, in the end, can forge a common understanding” (p. 83). Therefore, I used purposeful sampling, only participants engaged in the co-teaching model at the time of the study were asked to participate, to assure information gathered was relevant to the study. Described by Merriam (2009), “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77). The participant’s experience as practicing teachers ranged from two to thirty years. Two of the participants were co-teaching for the first time, while others had up to ten years of experience. Because the study was conducted within one school building, detailed identifying information was intentionally omitted to protect subjects’ right to confidentiality.

**Informed Consent and Confidentiality**

Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to each interview. The consent form included the purpose, procedures, risks, and subjects’ right to confidentiality (Appendix B). The participants were given a copy of the informed consent
to keep. The participants were informed of the voluntary nature of joining the study and that they were free to withdraw at any time without specifying any reason. There was no link between the consent forms and responses. Consent forms were stored separately in a locked file away from confidential data to be analyzed.

Audio recordings, data, and analysis files were kept in a password protected computer and backed up on an external hard drive. Only the dissertation advisors and I had access to the study’s data and analysis. Digital audio files will be deleted and written documents will be stored in locked files and shredded after three years.

There were no major unforeseen risks associated with the study. The only minimal risk of co-teachers foreseen was feeling discomfort when talking about their working environment, colleagues or when sharing dissatisfaction (if any). Although this presented a minimal risk, the participants were warned of the potential discomfort at the beginning of the interview and on the consent form. The participants were notified that they could discontinue the interview at any time. Pseudonyms were applied immediately at the time of consent to replace personal identifiers. The participants did not receive any compensation for their involvement in the study.

**Interview Protocol**

Phenomenological research supports the use of interviewing as a means of getting the participants to describe their experiences within first-person accounts (Glesne, 2011; Moustakas, 1994; Roulston, 2010). Merriam (2009) added, “The key concern is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspectives, not the researcher’s” (p. 14). The interview protocol included questions that asked the participants to reflect on their experiences of co-teaching as well as provide their
thoughts regarding what structural elements are needed to strengthen, sustain, and expand existing inclusive education. Guided by complexity theory, interview questions were uniquely created with the assumption that the middle school is a complex adaptive system wherein relationships are critical and nonlinear, dynamics are unpredictable, and interdependencies exist across all levels within the school (Mason, 2008; Richardson & Cilliers, 2001). Consequently, when designing the interview questions, the focus was on what the participants experienced and how the experiences were shaped by the complexities of a middle school system rather than their skill or knowledge of inclusive education or co-teaching. The first set of interview questions were developed to intentionally focus on the context in which the participants experienced inclusive education (e.g., ideas, actions, events, places, and relationships). Bevan (2014) explained, “Contextualizing questioning enables a person to reconstruct and describe his or her experience as a form of narrative that will be full of significant information (p. 139). The second set of interview questions focused on structural descriptions examining situations in which creativity, adaptive changes, and resolutions occurred to identify what structural elements are needed to strengthen, sustain, and expand existing inclusive education. Table 3 provides an example of each type of questions.
Table 3. Structure of Interview Questioning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Example Question from Interview Protocol</th>
<th>Questioning Technique</th>
<th>Connection to Complexity Theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Question One: How do co-teachers (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceive and describe their co-teaching experiences in a middle school?</td>
<td>Describe a defining moment as co-teacher.</td>
<td>Contextual – what the participants experienced.</td>
<td>Asking contexts questions encouraged the participants to describe experience and examine a phenomenon as it stands out against context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question Two: What structural elements of a middle school do co-teachers (general education teachers and special education teachers) engaged in co-teaching perceive as necessary to strengthen, sustain, and expand inclusive education?</td>
<td>How can you build on current structures of inclusive education in your school to make it more sustainable?</td>
<td>Structural - how the participants’ experiences were shaped by the complexities of a middle school.</td>
<td>The question is open-ended and encourages a wider view that is not driving towards a single solution but rather an integrative approach that incorporates existing structures with those emerging.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After receiving IRB approval (IRB-201704-301) from both the university and school district, an email invitation (Appendix D) was sent inviting 15 co-teachers to participate in the study, 13 agreed to participate. The email included details of the study, the purpose of the study, and a request to schedule an interview.

Figure 3 presents the structure of the interview procedure. The participants were interviewed at the middle school location. One-to-one interviews were conducted at a time convenient to each participant either before school, after school, or during the teacher’s preparation hour. This allowed the participants the opportunity to answer the
questions in their own words. Interviews were completed within minutes to comply with the rigid time constraints of the middle school daily schedule.

Interview questions encouraged discussions and exploration of co-teaching as well as asked the participants to offer suggestions on how to strengthen, sustain, and expand inclusive education practices within the school system. A semi-structured format was used as a guide during the interview (Appendix A) with further probes provided (e.g., can you give me an example; you mentioned ___, tell me what that was like for you) to gain greater detail and in-depth description (Roulston, 2010; Merriam, 2009). All 13 participants participated in a 30 to 45-minute semi-structured person-to-person interview. The interview focused on the nature and context of the participants’ experiences with co-teaching allowing the participants to answer the questions in their own words. Following the in-depth interviews, a brief 10 to 20-minute interview was conducted. The purpose of the follow-up interview was to reinforce and clarify prior responses and to verify the content drawn from the data was consistent with the lived experiences of the participants. Also, having an established rapport and trust with the participants was advantageous to the interview process. It provided a sense of openness and security which allowed the participants to share their perceptions and experiences with inclusive education. Glesne (2011) explained, “Rapport and trust are two concepts that have been used to describe ideal field relationships in qualitative inquiry” (p. 141).

Interviews were audiotaped using Voice Recorder. Voice Recorder is an application to record lectures, meetings, and interviews. After each interview, the recording was immediately uploaded to a password protected Dropbox. The recorded interviews were transcribed by a paid transcriptionist. The participants were identified by
the pseudonym selected at the time of the interview and any identifying information was removed from the transcripts.

Data saturation was achieved by interviewing multiple participants and using semi-structured interview question until no new information was attained and further coding became unnecessary (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). Strauss and Corbin (1998) explained saturation as, “No new or relevant data seem to emerge regarding a category, the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions, and the relationship among categories are well established and validated” (p. 212). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended interviewing participants to the point of informational redundancy, where no new information is presented despite continued interviews. The interview process continued until the point of saturation was reached and a sense that no new information was emerging (Crotty, 1998). Somewhere within the eighth and tenth interview, I recall gaining a sense of an underlying pattern to what I was hearing, but since I had already arranged additional interviews, I continued until completion of 13 interviews. Additionally, the mere quantity of participants (13) supported the concept of saturation (ample information) and the likelihood that theme development would occur (Roulston, 2010). Finally, to add to the trustworthiness of the study, the participants reviewed individual interview transcripts to verify correctness and clarify discrepancies.
Figure 3. Structure of Interview Procedure.

**Data Analysis**

Complexity theory guided the analysis for the study, Synder (2013) stated “A shift in emphasis is needed away from the analysis of individuals and outcomes to an analysis of processes and a shift in instructional culture toward greater systemic engagement amongst all actors and levels” (p. 13). Radford (2006) added, “The task is to describe and explain how individual schools adapt to changing conditions” and that research should be interested in how “as the local and short-term level, the complexity of factors and interconnections that constitute the school come together to function successfully in a given environment” (p. 185). Therefore, it was important to look at the process of how the co-teachers adapted to their role as co-teachers and the influences of interconnections and relationships when developing a descriptive analysis. These elements offered the context that contributed to an understanding of the patterns of interactions, decision making, and adaptive capacity of the co-teachers of the middle school. For the phenomenological study, the Moustakas (1994) method of analysis was used. The method consists of six steps and described as: (1) begin with full description of the participant’s personal experiences with inclusive education; (2) develop a list of
significant statements; (3) cluster the significant statements into “meaning units” or themes; (4) write a textural description; (5) write a structural description; and (6) write a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions that represent the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). A computer program specifically designed for qualitative research analysis, ATLAS.ti, was used in the beginning to organize data; additional analysis and organization was done by hand. Table 4 provides a procedural diagram of how data was analyzed in each step.

Table 4. Data Analysis Procedure (Adapting from Moustakas, 1994).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Procedure</th>
<th>Product</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listing each expression-horizonalization</td>
<td>Every expression and quote relevant to the participant’s experience was highlighted and divided into statements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful Units</td>
<td>Horizons were organized into meaningful units (unique qualities of the experience that stand out).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents</td>
<td>The meaningful units were brought to together to form invariant constituents. The clustered and labeled invariant constituents become the cores themes of the experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textural description of the experience</td>
<td>Description of what the participants experienced, included verbatim examples from the transcribed interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural description of the experience</td>
<td>Create a description of how the participants experienced the phenomenon, built from textural descriptions and imaginative variation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composite textural and structural descriptions</td>
<td>Present the essence of the phenomenon representing the group as a whole.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To begin the analysis, it was very important to become familiar with the data. To do so, I immersed myself in the data by listening to each interview recording while reading and rereading each transcript numerous times to capture the participants’ meaning from every angle and as comprehensively as possible. Moustakas (1994)
explained, “Each angle of perception adds something to one’s knowing of the horizons of a phenomenon” (p. 91). Significant statements, sentences, and quotes were highlighted in each transcript and preliminary groupings were established. The process of highlighting statements that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon is called horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). Within the horizontalization process, “we consider each of the horizons and the textural qualities that enable us to understand an experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95). It was important during the horizontalization process to treat every expression relevant to the topic equally to allow all themes to emerge or bring forth a fresh perspective (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

The meaningful units were clustered to form the invariant constituents. Invariant constituents are the unique qualities of the experience that stand out (Moustakas, 1994) in which the core themes from the participants’ experiences emerge. Expressions were eliminated if they were overlapping, repetitive, and vague. What remained became the invariant constituents of the participants’ experiences. Descriptive memos were added within Atlas.ti. to disclose researcher bias and to eliminate unintentional understandings.

Clustering the invariant constituents into core themes followed. For this study, theme areas were used as salient themes if at least ten of the 13 participants shared experiences related to the identified core themes. It was extremely helpful to create visuals in Atlas.ti for each core theme that emerged. I continued reduction and eliminations of invariant constituents to allow for the emergence of core themes common to all participants. To further validate the core themes, I returned to the interview recordings to compare against the transcripts for accuracy one additional time.
Next, significant statements and themes were written as a textural description of “what” the participants experienced with inclusive education. Textural descriptions embodied the integration of participants’ textural descriptions to represent a universal textural description. Moustakas (1994) stated, “In the textural description of an experience nothing is omitted; every dimension or phrase is granted equal attention” (p.78). The textural descriptions reflected the original experiences in the first-person language including verbatim examples from the participants.

The following step involved writing a *structural description* or a description of how the participants experienced co-teaching in an inclusive classroom. Moustakas (1994) explained this process as, “An extensive description of the textures of what appears and is given, one is able to describe *how* the phenomenon is experienced (p. 78). During this step, the focus was on the setting or context that influenced how the participants experienced inclusive education (Creswell, 2013).

Finally, a composite description was written of the phenomenon incorporating both textural and structural descriptions. Moustakas (1994) described this step as: “provides a logical, systematic, and coherent resource for carrying out the analysis and synthesis needed to arrive at essential descriptions of experience” (p. 47). From the textural and structural composite description, the “essence” of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013) was presented representing the beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives of co-teachers (general education teachers and special education teachers) engaged in co-teaching. Merriam (2009) described essence as, “Basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience” (p. 25).
Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness encompasses the extent to which the phenomena described accurately represents the experiences shared by the participants in the study (Zitomer & Goodwin, 2014). To assure trustworthiness, Creswell (1998) recommends that researchers engage in at least two of the following techniques: (1) prolonged engagement; (2) triangulation; (3) peer review; (4) negative case analysis; (5) clarification of research bias; (6) member checking; (7) rich, thick descriptions; and (8) external audits. In this study, I used prolonged engagement, member checking, rich, thick description, and clarification of research bias.

Prolonged Engagement

Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend “prolonged engagement” between the researcher and the participants for the researcher to gain an adequate understanding of an organization and to establish a relationship of trust between the parties. Contrary to quantitative researchers, who distance themselves from the participants and the research, a qualitative researcher is participatory (Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Prior to the research project, I was fortunate to work with many of the participants for many years in the capacity of a university supervisor. Throughout the research project, I was immersed in the school’s inclusive culture from the onset through the completion of the study to gain a deeper understanding as a whole. As the instructional coach during the 2016–2017 school year, I was able to build trust, develop rapport and build meaningful relationships with the participants throughout the 2016-2017 school year. My lengthy engagement and countless interactions with the participants aided in developing a rapport as well as allowed participants to think more deeply about their feelings, reactions, and beliefs.
It was the hope that the voices of the participants helped to shape the direction and content to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of inclusive education.

**Member Checking**

Member checking is used to provide credibility and reduce the threat of subjective bias (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2011; Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Maxwell, 2013). All participants were given a paper copy of their interview transcripts to review for accuracy and agreement (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2011; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). No participants requested additions, substitutions or changes.

After data were analyzed, four participants were randomly selected and given a list of the themes identified from the data to review the findings for further clarification (e.g., “Is this what you meant?” “Did I interpret this correctly?”) (Maxwell, 2013; Roulston, 2010). Supporting this use of member checking, Maxwell (2013) stated:

The single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what the participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your biases and misunderstanding of what you observed (p. 126-127).

The participants were able to give feedback on whether the ascertained themes truly represented their lived experiences and captured their individual lived experiences. There was consensus across all four participants that the identified themes represented their lived experiences as co-teachers engaged in co-teaching in the middle school.
Rich, Thick Description

Using rich, thick description, extensive use of quotes, and intricate details during data collection and analysis increased the transferability, or whether results can be generalized to others in similar context and situation, of the study (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, in-depth description will increase dependability and allow for the study to be repeated (Guba, 1981).

Clarification of Research Bias

An audit trail of audio recordings, interview transcriptions, and personal memos provided evidence to ensure trustworthiness and to demonstrate the findings emerged from the data and not my predispositions. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In qualitative research, époche (or bracketing) allows the researcher to disclose his/her experience and feelings as well as set aside prejudices, biases, and preconceived ideas (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009: Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) stated, “The value of the époche principle is that it inspires one to examine biases and enhances one’s openness even if a perfect and pure state is not achieved” (p. 61). This was particularly challenging for me to allow new ideas, feelings, and understandings to emerge (Moustakas, 1994) for I have extensive experiences and passion for inclusive education. Writing descriptive memos capturing my concerns, emotions, and insights throughout the study (Fischer 2009; Kingdon, 2005) provided a record of potential bias and predispositions (Roulston, 2010) as well as allowed me to reflect on how or if my bias may affect the study.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the lived experiences of co-teachers (general education teachers and special education teachers) engaged in co-teaching in a middle school setting. The collective core of the participants’ experiences concerning co-teaching in an inclusive environment was examined to uncover what textural and structural elements are needed to strengthen, sustain, and expand effective inclusive education for students with disabilities.

Findings

Thirteen middle school co-teachers were interviewed to discover the essence of their lived experiences co-teaching in an inclusive environment. The participants, four were special education teachers and nine were general education teachers, were part of a new co-teaching model initiated in a middle school the 2016-2017 school year. Despite the unequal distribution of general and special education teachers in the study (twice as many general educators), the perspectives of the general education teachers and special education teachers were often similar.

All interview transcripts were read and meaningful units were coded and entered into Atlas.ti. In the process of horizontalization, a total of 144 meaningful units were listed. After rereading all transcripts and completing numerous queries to validate data, the 144 meaningful units were reduced to 54. From the 54 meaningful units, 13 invariant
constituents were formed. From the remaining invariant constituents, seven core themes emerged capturing the participants’ experiences of co-teaching. To constitute saturation, 10 of the 13 participants needed to have similar experiences. Following analysis of data, it was determined that all themes contained experiences from the 13 participants. Figure 4 provides an illustration of the distribution of participants’ responses in relation to each textural and structural theme.

![Distribution Textural and Structural Themes](image)

Figure 4. Distribution of Participants’ Responses in Relation to Textural and Structural Themes.

The following sections are organized into the seven themes that emerged (four textural and three structural) including quotations as evidence. Quotations included were not meant to serve as an exhaustive list but rather representations of the participants’ perceptions and lived experiences of inclusive education. The following textural themes
emerged from the analysis of the data: (a) the promise of inclusive education; (b) quality of instruction; (c) development of relationships; and (d) personal and professional growth. The following structural themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) communication, (b) support, and (c) commitment. Figure 5 presents a data map illustrating the development of the textural and structural themes.

Figure 5. Map of (A) Themes to (B) Invariant Constituents to (C) Meaningful Units.

Composite Textural Descriptions

The meaningful units were clustered into themes. Meaningful units and themes were synthesized into a description of the texture (*the what*). Four textural themes emerged that represented what the co-teachers experienced co-teaching at the middle school most comprehensively: (a) the promise of inclusive education; (b) the quality of
instruction, (c) the development of relationships; and (d) the reality of personal and professional growth. Figure 6 provides an illustration of the distribution of participants’ responses in relation to textural themes. The figure also represents how saturation was reached from teacher one to thirteen.

![Distribution of Textural Themes](image)

**Figure 6. Distribution of Participants’ Responses in Relation to Textural Themes.**

The themes, invariant constituents, examples of meaningful units and examples of sample quotes are shown below in narrative form (see Table 5). A discussion in relation to the literature follows each textural theme.
Table 5. Textural Themes, Invariant Constituents, Meaningful Units, and Sample Quotes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Invariant Constituents</th>
<th>Meaningful Units</th>
<th>Sample Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promise of Inclusive Education</td>
<td>Providing opportunities equitable to peers</td>
<td>Access to grade level standards, least restrictive environment, all means all, access to peers</td>
<td>…it's best for everyone if we learn how to work together while developing our beliefs and behaviors and ethics. It's easier and it's healthier than if students for whatever reason aren't included</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased expectations</td>
<td>Increase my expectations, expect more, accountable, SPED teachers changed more</td>
<td></td>
<td>Trying to get that individual to see, to experience how a typical student acts in a classroom, how a typical student learns, how a typical student questions and follows through with things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurturing environment</td>
<td>Created positive learning environment, benefits – students are better off because of inclusive education</td>
<td></td>
<td>She [student] was participating, raising her hand, volunteering, and [sigh] awesome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of instruction</td>
<td>Power of two teachers</td>
<td>Both teachers used productively, naturally adding content, changing roles</td>
<td>But with two people there are lots of different ways you can shake things up to really help support the needs that are in the room and think about it from different perspectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher/student contact time increased</td>
<td>Flexible grouping, felt like small class, more supports, more engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td>I have the ability to get to more students. It makes it feel like a smaller class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation/specialized supports</td>
<td>Differentiated instruction, specialized instruction, special educator’s role</td>
<td></td>
<td>Just the added benefit of another teacher and seeing the change, how different my co-taught class is than my other classes, in terms of their understanding, they’re just getting it reiterated from more than one teacher, from getting a little bit different verbiage on things</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

69
Table 5. cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Invariant Constituents</th>
<th>Meaningful Units</th>
<th>Sample Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development of Relationships</td>
<td>Takes time, better with time.</td>
<td>Keeping co-teachers together, can’t force, comfortable</td>
<td>And I think for us it was just kind of like-- just making sure that we're sharing those things that are happening, that are working, and sharing those concepts of, &quot;We like this. We would like to do more of it.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration and communication.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Making our instruction better, talking about kids, support, reflecting, using resources, sharing responsibilities</td>
<td>Collaboration is using all your resources, your knowledge from other people and yourself to come up with the best practices for those kids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal and Professional Growth</td>
<td>Qualities of co-teacher</td>
<td>Risk-taking, flexibility open-minded, patience, care about kids, supportive</td>
<td>Let them know that you take an initiative, and you have interests in things, and you're willing to stick your nose into some things that you're probably thought, &quot;Well, maybe I shouldn't have,&quot; but you're ready to take some risks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing expertise and talent</td>
<td>Share wealth, talents, feedback, working together</td>
<td></td>
<td>But I said something that didn't make sense to some students, and she picked up on that and just re-explained it. And that was probably one of those moments that I was like, &quot;Hey, that's really helpful.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Textural Theme One: The Promise of Inclusive Education

When asked to describe their experiences co-teaching, the emphasis of the promise of inclusive education and meeting the needs of all students was one of the strongest themes that emerged. For this discussion, promise refers to indicators of success and benefits of inclusive education for all students. The participants commented on a
wide range of benefits and provided examples of successes they experienced the past year as co-teachers.

Providing opportunities equitable to peers. The participants agreed that inclusive education should afford the same opportunities for all students with disabilities to access the same quality education as their peers. The participants used all-inclusive descriptors such as “all” and “every”. Teacher 5 stated, “…including all students and allowing them access to the regular curriculum.” Teacher 9 stated, “Everybody is included. They are given largely the same classroom opportunities that anybody else is.” Teacher 11 added, “It's giving every student, all students of all disabilities, an opportunity to learn.” Teacher 1 stated, “It’s trying to keep as many students in the general education classroom as possible.” Teacher 6 expanded the description of all students to include peers without disabilities, “not just kids who have an identified learning disability, but it's the best thing for all kids because not all learning is academic. Some of it is preparation for the rest of your life.”

The participants believed quality education included providing instruction and supports at the students’ level. Teacher 8 explained, “Creating an environment for all students, regardless of their abilities or levels, they [students with disabilities] can take part in experiencing the same type of curriculum and the same type of instruction at the same time.” Teacher 5 added, "…including all students and allowing them access to the regular curriculum. That all students deserve an education that's commensurate with their peers, but also at their level with the accommodations needed to be successful.” In addition, teacher 7 described inclusive education as eminent because it mirrors society. She shared:
My philosophy is that both teachers and students, all students, benefit from inclusive education. So, whether a student has learning disabilities or they are exceptional for some other reason, I think that it's best if instruction is modeled after society. And so, a student who leaves high school or middle school and gets a job, people aren't going to be labeled and identified and separated and etc. And so, my philosophy is that it's best for everyone if we learn how to work together while developing our beliefs and behaviors and ethics. It's easier and it's healthier than if students, for whatever reason, aren't included and then all kids go out in society and they're expected to operate in a completely different environment.

**Increased expectations.** The participants believed teaching in inclusive settings increased teacher expectations for students with disabilities. Attributing to high expectations, the participants believed the performance of students with disabilities improved in inclusive classrooms. Teacher 3 explained:

> If you're attempting to include all, then you have to maintain relatively high standards for those students and then you have to make that accessible to them, to meet that. And I think co-teaching is, if they're going to make it… that's the way to do it, in inclusive education.

Other participants echoed the same perspective. Teacher 11 shared:

> The expectation is that they [students with disabilities are given] the highest level expectation, that they all can learn way up here with everybody… I guess that I look at it as that, and I know everybody's the same but different, but my expectations of what I think of them, I want them [students with disabilities] to be accountable and responsible just like everybody else.
Teacher 2 stated:

It's providing the least restrictive environment for a child so that they can be with their peers. And I think a lot of things that I've seen it seems to really raise the expectations for students and help in terms of just getting kids to move forward.

Two participants shared how working in an inclusive classroom helped special education teachers to increase their expectations of students. For example, a general education teacher shared this conversation she had with a special education teacher:

I need the experience in the inclusive classroom in order to understand how hard I should be pushing my students. Because she said sometimes the expectations that you have, that you hold, that you want us to push for. In the back of my head, I'm thinking, some of our kids aren't going to get there. And then they surprise me by getting there. And so, I really think that it's important for, even if teachers are going to teach regularly in a pull-out setting, or a setting that's less inclusive, I think they need opportunities to experience what other students at grade level are doing. (T7)

**Nurturing Environment.** The participants shared how inclusive classrooms provided a nurturing environment for students with disabilities to grow academically, socially, and behaviorally. As a result, the confidence of students with disabilities improved. The participants believed inclusive education created a sense of community and security in the classrooms where students with disabilities experienced opportunities to interact and learn. Teacher 8 captured the importance of fostering a caring environment when she stated, “I think we've really built this environment where it's safe and your thoughts are your thoughts and we are respectful of them and we celebrate you. And I
think the kids are really responding to that.” Several participants shared examples of how their classrooms provided safe, respectful and accepting environments for student.

Bringing him back into my co-taught class helped his confidence, and I had [special education teacher’s name] in there so ‘it's okay’…because now we're in a big classroom setting, but to see him grow and enjoy that and just the-- involved with more of the kids and interacting with that I think that was really a great move for him. (T11)

You could see progress. The kids [students with disabilities] started participating during class. They're more confident. They're organized. They feel a part of the class. I mean, they just love coming to [name of class]. But that's because both teachers have a very vested interest in their learning and how they are looked at, how they are included despite some of the very difficult disabilities they have. But showing that when two teachers just truly care and work together with these students that they feel a part of that classroom. And I just found once they feel a part of that classroom, they just blossomed and bloomed. It's been amazing. (T5)

In terms of kids, we've had several kids move in from other districts this year and just one of them in particular, she came in the district as a foster kid, and you can just see that her confidence level is just booming right now. And I think having the two co-teachers and a para in the room has really given her that opportunity to really work in small group or large group and have that confidence to really feel good about herself and her abilities. And I don't think she would have had that in a regular classroom. I think the co-taught classroom was absolutely perfect for her. (T10)
Discussion for Textural Theme One: The Promise of Inclusive Education

For this discussion, promise refers to indicators of success and benefits of inclusive education for all students. Throughout all interviews, the participants repeatedly shared common beliefs and philosophy of the promise of inclusive education. Friend et al. (2010) described inclusive education as, “The philosophical belief system of welcoming all students into the learning community” (p. 15). The participants agreed the promise of inclusive education was providing equitable opportunities for students with disabilities and their peers. The 13 participants believed that all students were welcomed in their inclusive classrooms and co-teaching was a strategy they used to attain that goal. Inclusive education researchers suggest that teachers’ philosophy and beliefs about instructing students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms significantly influenced the students’ success (Carter et al., 2009; Isherwood & Barger-Anderson, 2008; Lindeman & Magiera, 2014). Strogolis and Stefanidis (2015) affirmed that the positive attitudes of co-teachers were related to behavioral improvements and the learning progress of students with disabilities in an inclusive classroom. Positive teacher attitudes may lead to increased sustainability of inclusive practices (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Silvermann, 2007).

The participants believed their expectations for students with disabilities increased in inclusive settings. Further, the participants maintained that not only was it important to have high expectations, also to expect students to achieve and to create conditions in the classroom to promote achievement. Inclusive education researchers, Florian, Black-Hawkins and Rouse (2016), stated that successful inclusive teachers believe that all students are learners and create conditions to support all learners in the
inclusive classroom. The participants believed students with disabilities performance improved in inclusive classrooms because of high expectations. Lindeman and Magiera (2014) support this belief indicating that committed professionals and high teacher expectations contributed to student success in inclusive settings.

The participants believed inclusive classrooms provided a safe learning community in which students felt valued and accepted. They believed they created a classroom environment that enabled students with disabilities learn at their optimal levels. Inclusive education researchers, Florian, Black-Hawkins, and Rouse (2016), stated that successful inclusive teachers create a classroom community that supports the learning of all students. The literature suggests that when co-teachers considered students with disabilities full members of the general education classroom, students were valued and achieved success (Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012). Many researchers agree that when students with disabilities are educated in the general education settings that are supportive, they demonstrate growth and improvements in social, academic, and behavior skills (Feldman, Carter, Asmus, & Brock, 2015; Hoppey, 2016; Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015; Walsh, 2012).

Textural Theme Two: Quality of Instruction

The participants perceived that the quality of their instruction improved as a result of co-teaching. The participants believed the quality of instruction improved because of the power of two teachers, the increased teacher/student contact time, and instruction that is differentiated and provides specialized supports.

**Power of Two Teachers.** The participants believed that instruction improved because of having two teachers in a classroom. They believed that because of co-
teaching, they were able to implement a variety of grouping strategies and take full advantage of both teachers to address the needs of all students not just students with disabilities. The participants believed the instruction improved because each teacher approached things differently, therefore they could potentially reach a wider range of students. Teacher 6 believed with two teachers in the room, they are able to reach all learners. He stated:

You’re bringing two experts into a classroom [teacher’s name] is an expert in teaching [name of subject], and I am an expert in teaching students with special needs….they’re [general education teacher] reaching 60% of the kids in the class. How they [general education teacher] teach it and the model in which they teach it, to varying degrees they are reaching over half the class. What I add to the class in teaching it a different way, or clarifying, or taking vocabulary and explaining vocabulary in a different way, I’m hoping to reach the remaining 40%. That would be ideal even though it’s not always the case. Bringing a different perspective on things, if you will.

Teacher 9 felt students benefited, she stated:

Just the added benefit of another teacher and seeing the change, how different my co-taught class is than my other classes, in terms of their understanding, their [student with disabilities] just getting it reiterated from more than one teacher, from getting a little bit different verbiage on things, what they get out of their class, as opposed to the other classes is different, and it's better, in a lot of ways. And I look forward to that class because of that but also because it's really nice to
have that support for me, as another teacher, not just for the kids but for me to have a second set of eyes, a second set of help when it's time for kids working.

Teacher 8 found flexible groupings advantageous:

I lead one half of the class to discuss something. And meanwhile, he's simultaneously leading another half of students. And then we switch. And then we kind of all come together and share our thought processes. So, it's cool for [teacher’s name] and I when we switch to get to see where each group is at. And then when we come together and have a whole class discussion, it's nice for the kids to see, to get to kind of share their ideas in the open and for us to watch that blend and come together.

Teacher 4 believed the co-taught classroom was her more successful class of the day. She stated, “It's not just because it makes anything easier for us or whatever the case would be. But it's more successful. I would say my fourth-hour class is probably one of my more successful class.” Teacher 3 repeated the sentiment, “My co-taught is better behaved and has a higher completion of work than my other classes.”

**Increased teacher/student contact time.** The participants believed the quality of their instruction improved because of increased teacher/student engagement.

Teacher/student contact time increased because they could work with smaller groups of students. Teacher 1 explained:

I also really, really like small group work where you’re responsible for a smaller set of students. So, we’ve done quite a few times where we might have six groups and I’ll keep three in here [in the classroom]. And she has three out there [in the
commons area] and I just focused on bouncing between those three groups.

Rather than trying to hit six groups. I like that feel of I’m focusing on less kids. Teacher 3 added, “It felt like we were both really available for students and so I guess if I picked a really positive moment, I would just, fourth hour is much nicer than a lot of my other classes because I have the ability to get to more students. It makes it feel like a smaller class.” Additionally, participants shared positive stories of increased teacher/student engagement as the result of co-teaching:

So, I really liked doing that, having a station teaching or even sometimes just small group to work. We would be in here for large group instruction and going through it. And she [co-teacher] was bringing up questions or clarifying what I was saying. And as the whole class was in here with our discussion, then when it would come time to work, then we would kind of break apart and then have smaller groups, and that was really nice. (T9)

I like that we are able to get these kids in the smaller groups. I think the smaller group setting really lets the kids feel that courage. Having that ability to voice their opinion on things versus the large group. And so, I think that strategy of having [co-teacher’s name] in there and the co-teaching group allows us the small group setting. (T10)

Notably, teacher 13 compared data from all her classes throughout the day and credited improved student progress and success in her co-taught class to the increased teacher contact time and support. She explained:

One of the best things that I can think of is the hour that I have, my co-teaching hour… I would look at how much growth they would have and how well they do--
my co-taught class was just—growing so much faster because they just had so
much more support, same amount of time but more support.

**Differentiation/specialized supports.** The participants perceived it was their
obligation to differentiate instruction and provide specialized supports. Teacher 7
explained, “I think, at the end of the day, what's really important is the students and their
needs, and I think a good philosophy is to ask yourself, ‘Am I doing everything that I can
be doing to support my students' needs?’” Teacher 10 added, “I think as an inclusive
teacher, you have to be willing to make those modifications and adaptations and you have
to be able to go through and tier your lessons and modify the lessons to meet different
levels of learners in that classroom.” The following participants shared examples of how,
as co-teachers, they were able to differentiate the instruction and provided specialized
supports to all students:

Oftentimes, we were really talking about the kids in the room and saying, ‘What
is it that the kids are going to need?’ And try to figure that out as best as we
can…..I think with each group of students, you have to be really selective of what
you're doing and I think we [co-teachers] did the things that we thought were
going to be best for helping get these kids on a path where success could be built,
a foundation where success could be built. And I think we were able to do that.
(T2)

…and then being able to adapt to different, every student is different so you can't
really group them and say, "These five individuals all are learning a certain way."
Even if I do have a group of individuals I still know that this one needs, it has to
be very individualized. (T13)
……have heard things two different ways because we'll explain things differently. And so, it's fun to see them kind of grasp on different days to certain learning styles or things like that where the kids have benefited from-- although we're similar, there's differences. And I think that the kids have benefited from getting information two different ways or hearing it differently. (T12)

Lastly, teacher 9 described differentiation as, “Try to figure out a way to reach all students and get the same understanding and concepts to everybody. That it might take a couple of different routes to get there, but to get there nonetheless, to get them to understand the given concepts and give them the same opportunity. And by same the opportunity, I think that just might mean that other people-- some might need a different direction than others. Some might need more repetition than others, but to provide that for them, so whether it takes one time or five times.”

**Discussion for Textural Theme Two: Quality of Instruction**

The participants believed the quality of their instruction improved as the result of co-teaching. They credited the success to having two teachers in the room. Because of the power of two teachers, the participants could implement a variety of grouping strategies and take full advantage of both teachers to address all the needs of the students in the inclusive classrooms. Almost half of the participants identified the need to increase the role of the special educator in the classroom. Kusuma-Powell and Powell (2016) found that equal status of co-teachers within the school is the key to fostering learning. They also found that raising the status of special education teachers was the key to developing effective programs. They characterized effective co-teaching by both teachers contributing equally, but often differently, to the classroom context. Beninghof (2015)
stated the greatest positive effect on students in inclusive classrooms were specialists bringing in their expertise and “doing something special” (p. 12).

The participants believed instruction improved because of their capacity to increase teacher contact time with students. According to Graziano and Navarrete (2012), co-teaching enabled teachers to better meet the diverse needs of their students through a smaller student-to-teacher ratio and more individualized support and attention. Likewise, there is a plethora of research that suggests students with disabilities who received services in the general education settings report receive more instructional time (Blackorby et al., 2005; Waldron, Cole, & Majd, 2001). The participants found working with smaller groups of students beneficial. Traditionally, smaller instructional groups allow teachers to get to know students better, provide more immediate student assistance, and minimize student distractions (Friend & Bursuck, 2012). Also, regrouping students provides opportunities for specialized instruction in a more natural way than pulling students out of classrooms (Muraski & Hughes, 2009).

Co-teaching was viewed by participants as a vehicle for providing supports and differentiated instruction for students. Friend (2015) stated the aim of co-teachers, “Is to create a classroom culture of acceptance, in which learning variations and strategies are the norm” (p. 21). Because of co-teaching, the participants were able to implement a variety of grouping strategies, use different approaches, and modify instruction when necessary. Smith, Gartin, and Murdick, (2012) presented various examples of differentiation including offering student choices, using flexible grouping, presenting content at various skill levels, creating multiple means of assessment, and creating
Respectful learning environments based on the student’s unique needs, skill levels, and interests.

Textural Theme Three: Development of Relationships

The third theme that emerged from the analysis of data was the belief that the relationship between co-teachers was the foundation of successful co-teaching. When the participants were asked about their experiences co-teaching, all participants expressed that quality relationships with their co-teachers were important. The participants shared how their relationships with their co-teacher took time to build, and as they became more comfortable working with their partner, they believed their instruction improved. And lastly, the participants valued working collaboratively with their co-teacher.

**Time to build, better with time.** All participants valued their relationship with their co-teacher and believed their relationship was the foundation of successful co-teaching. Teacher 5 unequivocally declared “relationship” when asked what makes co-teaching successful, “I would have to, hands down, say relationships.” Similarly, other participants valued strong relationships with their co-teachers. The participants shared:

> The number one thing I'd say with co-teaching role that I think of is the relationship between the two teachers, that they need to have a meshing, strong relationship together. And I really think of co-teaching as a marriage, in a way, just like with your spouse. You have to be able to communicate with each other in order to both carry out all the different things you need to do in your life. Who's going to mow the lawn? And who's going to empty the dishwasher? And a lot of times you don't have to talk about it every day. But if you can do that really well together, then, you can almost have like an unspoken thought process. (T13)
Honestly, relationship-building with people that they're working with. I think that's when it flows the best. I really feel like having that good relationship piece makes the rest of it easy. .... And I think when you have time to have a relationship then it just makes it-- everything else just follows. (T12)

It's a relationship. It's kind of a bond that you have with your teacher, your co-teacher, your students. Whether it's a para in the classroom, it's really a community, and you're building that community. And the more people, the more adults, you have in that community to help with not maybe raise the kids but educate the kids, the better. And to me, co-teaching is just, just that. It's bringing adults together, working together for the purpose of helping the kids. (T10)

The participants valued quality relationships with their co-teachers but also shared that quality relationships take time and effort to build. Teacher 13 shared, “Now that we've been together, it would be easier, you know because at the beginning of the year we had to get to know each other.” Teacher 7 described being nervous at the beginning of the relationship, “There's always a certain level of nervousness about building a relationship because I think that's so important.” The participants believed that as their relationships became stronger, they became more comfortable and confident. Teacher 1 explained, “Having that comfort level with her after two years. We knew enough about each other and we knew each other well enough that we weren’t going to offend each other, so that was a pretty defining moment” (T1). Teacher 4 demonstrated the importance of teamwork in the co-teaching relationship, “Both of us are going to make it work. It's going to work. It's not a question of how. It's a question of when.”
Collaborating with her special education allowed teacher 9 to improve her instruction.

She added:

Once we got comfortable with each other as teachers, it didn't take long to have us both be jumping in on the same lesson. And there were a couple times--whenever you have somebody else that can give their expertise and their view to something, with having my co-teacher having the special education background, she just is really good at picking up on common pitfalls that it didn't even dawn on me. And so, she would jump in and say, "I think many of you might be thinking this, and I just want to caution you." And would kind of change things or explain it in a different way that just made me go, "Why didn't I think of that? Why didn't I get that?" And you could just see the kids respond, whereas or they would nod and, "Yep, I get it. Yep, I get it." (T9)

Teacher 11 stated that building relationships were important throughout the entire school, he stated, “I think as a staff, you have to build some kind of relationships with each other even though you're not working directly with each other, somehow build that so you have--when people come in and if there's a change, it's like, ‘Oh, yeah, that's right, I know this person is good at their job and they can do this.’”

**Need for collaboration and communication.** Collaboration and communication were regarded by co-teachers as indispensable when describing the power of relationships. Several participants shared examples of positive collaborative experiences:

We figure out how we can all bring our ideas together, to benefit students. So, it's kind of like putting together a puzzle. Put together the pieces and this is how it will work. Sometimes it works beautifully, and sometimes not so much. But
figuring out how are we going to put together those pieces, and I think kind of the beauty of it is that we can all bring our strengths into that collaborative situation. (T7)

And a lot of the times I’ll ask her advice on “What should we do with these students?” or “How should we do this activity differently than the other classes are doing it?” Cause it really requires that. (T1)

Being able to collaborate together and talk about different ways and strategies to approach it. Being able to talk about the students' needs and then discuss, "How can we conquer those or get through those obstacles?" And sometimes that's working together. And sometimes that's breaking up into separate groups and tackling two different pieces. (T13)

Teacher 12 appreciated the opportunity to reflect and receive feedback on instruction. She stated, “I think that for me it's been great to be able to have somebody to reflect with and not just on my own, nobody else in here, you know to have that feedback from [teacher’s name] saying, ‘Hey, throw in this or try-- what about this?’ or things like that, the feedback piece and the reflection of somebody else.”

**Discussion for Textural Theme Three: Development of Relationships**

The third theme that emerged from the data was the belief that relationships were the foundation of successful co-teaching. It is documented in inclusive education literature that when co-teachers have a positive working relationship and share similar philosophies, students were more likely to experience success in co-taught classrooms (Leatherman, 2009; Mastropieri et al., 2005; Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015; Williams, 2014). The participants believed relationship building was crucial to their success as co-
teachers. Keefe and Moore (2004) conducted a study that examined the challenges of co-teaching found the relationships between the co-teachers was the most important determinant in how successful the teacher viewed co-teaching and whether they would like to continue co-teaching.

The participants also shared that co-teaching relationships take time to build, so consequently, as they became more comfortable working with their partner, they believed their instruction improved. Murawski and Bernhardt (2016) stated it takes time and commitment learning the content and for co-teachers to learn how to collaborate and work together effectively.

The ability to collaborate and communicate effectively was identified by co-teachers as a necessary component of their co-teaching relationships. Rytivaara and Kershner (2012) defined successful collaboration as, “Active involvement of both teachers in the task of instruction, and true sharing of the work is seen to be essential” (p. 1001). Likewise, Friend and Cook (2012) added collaboration is, “Shared decision making as they [co-teachers] work toward a common goal” (p. 6). The study conducted by Kozleski et al. (2015) found that sustainable, inclusive schools necessitate strong communication and interactions between inclusive educators. The participants in the previous study believed collaborative relationships improved their co-teaching. Stivers (2008) also indicated communication and collaboration as essential to the success of any collaborative partnership. In addition, Deppeler (2010) stated that co-teachers who communicated and collaboratively solved problems positively impacted learning.
Textural Theme Four: Personal and Professional Growth

The fourth textural theme that emerged from the data involved personal and professional growth. The participants shared that they experienced personal and professional growth because of co-teaching. They revealed personal stories of growth in the areas risk-taking, flexibility, and open-mindedness. Also, the participants believed inclusive education presented opportunities to share expertise and talents.

**High-quality co-teacher: risk taker.** Several general education teachers identified risk-taking as one important area of growth because they had to welcome another adult in their classroom. Teacher 1 explained:

Letting go a little bit to the co-teacher and I think I’m hesitant….I think until this year I didn’t really see that as my role in co-teaching. I thought I was supposed to be controlling it and be directing it. So, I think being willing to open to those risks and release a little more control.

Both a special educator and a general educator offered advice to other co-teachers to take risks and get more involved. Teacher 6 stated:

Take a chance, go in, make your voice heard. Be an advocate for your students and all students. Go big. Whatever you have to do to say, “Hey, let me teach this.” Not even, “Let me teach this, or hey, I think I should teach this.” What advice do you have for the best way to do this? Advocate for yourself to get more involved in everyday instruction. That better builds that relationship. My advice would be, take a chance. As special educators as a whole, we don’t take enough chances at instruction.
Teacher 11 shared her thoughts:

But I think that just getting yourself out there and building your, who you are as a teacher and a professional in the building. I think that helps. Not standing back and letting somebody else take over. Let them know that you take an initiative, and you have interests in things, and you're willing to stick your nose into some things that you're probably thought, "Well, maybe I shouldn't have," but you're ready to take some risks.

**High-quality co-teacher: Flexibility.** Both general and special educators identified learning to be flexible as an important area of interpersonal growth. Teacher 7 stated, “The reason why we’re able to overcome obstacles is because of that flexibility of both of us.” Teacher 6 stated, “I think flexibility is important, just because sometimes what you believe will work is not what really works and then you have to think about it and choose a different attack.” Teacher 1 described flexibility as a necessity, she explained:

Flexibility, you just have to have it! And I still struggle with that one a little bit. But being flexible on timeliness. Being flexible on groupings. Being flexible on the fact that one class is not going to be at the same place as another one…being willing to throw what you thoughts you had planned to the side for a bit

Teacher 8 described flexible thinking as a trait she would desire in a co-teacher,

So, if I could have someone that is flexible and that is willing to kind of give a little bit and let me kind of take hold of some of the instruction that I know is very important to them and they take ownership in it because it is something that they've worked very hard to perfect. So, I think definitely flexibility.
High-quality co-teacher: open-minded. The last area of personal growth described by the participants embraced the necessity of open-mindedness of a co-teacher. Teacher 3 explained, “You just got to be open to understand another person's work and how they can be helpful, and sort of just tell them to be committed because it won't be perfect right away.” Teacher 4 believed open-mindedness is vital to co-teaching, “Open-mindedness is probably the biggest one because you are having someone come into what's your classroom.” Lastly, teacher 6 summarized open-mindedness in terms of being open to the idea of “reasonable conflict”, he explained:

You need to be open to the idea of, I’ll use the phrase, reasonable conflict. You’re not always going to agree with how the other person is doing something. Sometimes you have to agree to disagree, but if you sit and there’s something they do that bugs you or something they’re not doing that you think they should be doing, you have to be able to express that and have a professional conversation about it. You also have to have confidence. You have to believe that whatever time you get to lead the whole class, or whatever activity you’re going to design, or what you have to contribute to the process is important and worthwhile.

Sharing expertise and talent. Nine participants believed co-teaching provided extensive opportunities to learn from each other by sharing their expertise and talents. The participants shared stories of professional growth. Teacher 1 explained:

Even just sharing the wealth as far as some days she spent enough time working with the struggling students, and she needed somebody to step in. Or I had enough time with the high rollers [used to describe students with challenging behaviors]
and I needed her to step in. And so, that came a long way this year, I think. Just really spreading out our talents through all the kids.

In addition, the participants reported learning from the co-teachers they worked with.

Teacher 10 stated:

I know one thing that I as a regular education teacher am amazed at with the special education teachers is how they're able to go through and modify and adapt and create things for kids to find their strengths and their weaknesses. I don't think I as a regular education teacher really know all there is to know about those special needs.

Teacher 8 added:

“What do you think? Is there anything that we could add or is there some [something] that you think is going to be difficult. I love to hear your input.” So, for me that was really a defining moment to make me feel, where maybe I hadn't in the past, like I was really-- my assets as an educator were valuable, and people were interested in my thoughts.

I would hope as we have collaborated and as we’ve worked together and gotten to know each other, I can tell you right now both of those two [teachers] have taught me a lot about [name of the content area]. My hope is that maybe I’ve taught them a little bit about students and how students think and how to teach a student that doesn’t have a (name of content area) mind or really struggles with having a [name of content area] mind. I would like to believe both [teachers] would think they’re at least a little bit better teachers for having me in the classroom with them. (T6)
Discussion for Textural Theme Four: Personal and Professional Growth

The participants shared that they experienced personal and professional growth as a result of co-teaching. The participants identified key interpersonal skills of successful co-teachers as being risk-takers, flexible, and open-minded. Teachers are recognized as key players in supporting the process leading to successful inclusive education systems (Navarro, Zervas, Gesa, & Sampson, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to identify key qualities to support and recognize co-teachers who are trying to attain these qualities. Klinger and Vaughn (2002) stated effective co-teaching necessitates communicating effectively, sharing power over instruction and being flexible.

Also, the participants believed sharing expertise and talents improved their co-teaching. Research provides evidence that co-teachers improve their pedagogy because they have increased opportunities to learn effective instructional strategies and share expertise to meet the individual needs of diverse learners (Friend & Cook, 2012; O’Rourke, 2015; Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012). Mandel and Eiserman (2016) in their work on team teaching found three essential benefits of team teaching, specifically it, (a) promotes teacher growth, (b) encourages risk-taking, and (c) provides emotional support.

Composite Structural Descriptions

The textural descriptions were examined from different perspectives (imaginative variation) from which the description of the structure (the how) was arrived. Three structural composite themes were derived from the participants describing the context or setting that influenced their experiences co-teaching, presenting a picture of what conditions affected their co-teaching experience. Data analysis revealed three composite structural themes (a) communication, (b) supports, and (c) commitment. Figure 7
provides an illustration of the distribution of participants’ responses in relation to structural themes. The figure also represents how saturation was reached from teacher one to thirteen.

![Distribution of Structural Themes](image)

**Figure 7. Distribution of Participants’ Responses in Relation to Structural Themes.**

The structural themes, invariant constituents, meaningful units and sample quotes are presented in Table 6.
Table 6. Structural Themes, Invariant Constituents, Meaningful Units, and Sample Quotes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Invariant Constituents</th>
<th>Meaningful Units</th>
<th>Sample Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Understand roles and responsibilities</td>
<td>Roles and responsibilities, meetings with administration, felt valued, involved in the process</td>
<td>And it's just been really--this year, I feel like things have worked smoother than the past and mainly because we're just informed a little bit more as to what we should be doing and what's expected and I think that it did work really well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for feedback</td>
<td>Feedback from administrator, someone come in and observe</td>
<td></td>
<td>There was nothing evaluative about it [co-teaching]. It was just, &quot;This is what I saw and this is what you might be able to improve.&quot; And then also say, &quot;I'm really excited about what I see and here's why.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need accountability</td>
<td>Accountable, document co-planning, want to get better</td>
<td></td>
<td>I think another thing that really helped this year, that makes people want to do it [co-teaching] and want to keep improving it is, I really think, checking in and feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports</td>
<td>Need more time</td>
<td>Co-planning, more intentional and purposeful</td>
<td>And the thing that I think teachers lack, unfortunately, is time to collaborate, I really think. Because collaboration is key. I think if you don’t have collaboration, then you're not co-teaching, and then an inclusive environment won't be successful for students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6. cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Invariant Constituents</th>
<th>Meaningful Units</th>
<th>Sample Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need professional development.</td>
<td>Good but could be better, expectations and roles, go to other classrooms to observe</td>
<td></td>
<td>I think one thing that's a possibility is to provide an opportunity for additional training. The opportunity to watch other people and watch other people work in an inclusive setting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>Need to Prioritize</td>
<td>Barriers, co-teaching a priority by all, need resources, class size and space issues, caseloads</td>
<td>Priorities. What do they value? And if they really valued the kids-- and this might be harsh to say but if you really valued the kids, if you came into our co-taught classroom you would go, I would want co-taught classroom in every classroom because it benefits every kid that's in this classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need consistency</td>
<td>Keep co-teachers together, stick to the plan, no changes from year to year</td>
<td></td>
<td>To not try to make too many changes. Stick with something for quite a while and say, “Here is why it [co-teaching] worked. Here is why it didn’t work. Let’s make those changes.” That’s ideal. I still think…people get frustrated. They want to be treated like professionals.</td>
</tr>
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Structural Theme One: Communication

Effective communication was perceived by all participants as a precipitating factor for sustaining and improving co-teaching. The participants not only believed effective communication was essential among co-teachers, but was also needed between co-teachers and administration. They credited quality communication to the greater understanding of their roles and responsibilities as a co-teacher. The participants believed communication necessitates on-going and constructive feedback. Lastly, the participants
believed communication provided accountability needed to drive the expansion of co-teaching.

**Understanding roles and responsibilities.** Participants overwhelmingly believed clearer directions and reliable information from administration improved co-teaching this past year. The participants believed they understood their roles and responsibilities as co-teachers due to improved communication. The participants believed understanding roles and responsibilities facilitated effective co-teaching. Teacher 9 explained:

> I think it was because we switched up how our co-teaching was handled this year and was given more direction in more expectations. And some of it was good and some of it wasn't, but most of it was good and if nothing else, made us think, "Oh, I never thought of that." ....and it's just been really-- this year, I feel like things have worked smoother than the past and mainly because we're just informed a little bit more as to what we should be doing and what's expected and I think that it did work really well.

Teacher 11 also shared positive comments pertaining to improved communication, “What I found that was really helpful is the chance that we did sit down in those meetings.”

Teacher 6 believed clearer expectations of teacher roles and responsibilities could make co-teaching sustainable, she stated, “I think establishing those practices makes it sustainable. I think establishing those practices and expectations make it more sustainable.” An overlapping issue that surfaced was the necessity of co-teachers carrying out the roles and responsibilities outlined for them. Teacher 8 explained:

> If co-teaching is truly to work, each person needs to do, needs to hold up their end of the deal, so to speak, and I think making sure that both the general education
teacher and special education teacher are doing what they need to be doing. I think it’s really important because it truly is in co-teaching. [If] we just have one teacher at the front of the room and another person in the back, so I think it’s important to make sure that that’s not happening. And I think of that has to come from the two individuals that are teaching together. But I think if administration too could be like, hey, this is not what this is. Making that really clear.

**Need Opportunities for Feedback.** The participants believed successful inclusive education required feedback that is informational, on-going and constructive. They believed feedback would help them to grow as co-teachers. Teacher 13 explained, “To fill our bucket up to - like our personal buckets - to be able to be like, ‘Okay, we are doing. This is the right path. This is what we should be doing.’” Similarly, teacher 1 expressed the importance of feedback. She shared:

But to get that feedback, to get that input as to, “How can we make this better? How else could this work? This is certainly not working the way it is, the way I envisioned it.” To get some of that.

In addition, several participants believed feedback from outside experts would be beneficial. Teacher 8 elucidated:

I would like the district to bring in more experts, like yourself, to come watch and provide feedback both constructive and critical…I would be totally comfortable with someone coming and saying, ‘Ok. You did this. Try doing this. Try doing something different.’…Come in and say, ‘Ok. Yeah, you guys are doing this, but do this. This is better.’ Take a chance. I’m looking for more critical feedback than
‘Yeah, it looks like it’s going well.’ Is it going well in [name of school]? Or is it going well in co-teaching as a whole? I want to be critiqued more.

Teacher 9 believed feedback would help to make inclusive education more sustainable, she explained:

But to make it more sustainable, I think another thing that really helped this year that makes people want to do it and want to keep improving it is, I really think, checking in and feedback. And I really felt like we were heard for the most part. And I know they can't grant all our wishes and they can't do everything, but it's nice to have somebody asking, "How's it going, what's working, what's not working." Just to get that collaboration time, that time to talk and brainstorm and see that it's important to somebody else, too. I think that definitely helps keep things going, too.

In contrast, several participants believed they did not receive quality feedback the past year and would appreciate the opportunity in the future. Teacher 5 stated, “No one came in to observe, no one gave us feedback.” Likewise, teacher 7 believed quality feedback would be helpful, he stated:

There was nothing evaluative about it. It was just, "This is what I saw and this is what you might be able to improve." And then also say, "I'm really excited about what I see and here's why." And so, I think as teachers, we worry too much about evaluation, maybe because it's tied to money or it's tied to success, identified success or etc. And I also know from having had the opportunity to do walkthroughs that I always learn something from watching other people and how they handle content and instruction and grouping and all of the things. That
differentiation, all of the things that we think about. So, I think that might be one thing, the opportunity to have someone who doesn't have the role of evaluation but just to come in as an observer and say, "This is what I saw. This is what you might try." I think that could be helpful.

Several participants believed feedback should be ongoing. They also believed they should meet regularly and share stories of success and offer encouragement. The participants shared:

Well, you encourage them. You just say, "Hey. We appreciate what you're doing” … And I thought it was a great benefit for us to go through it and just communicate back and forth with you about the whole co-teaching model. (T10)

I really feel like we were maybe-- I felt like our opinion was looked for and listened to, this year, in terms of our meetings. And I felt like when we discussed what was working and what wasn't working. (T9)

I have to say that all of the conversations this year, even though some of those planning sessions have felt like they weren’t planning sessions, the conversation and reflection on co-teaching and what we want it to be and the point of it and advantages of it. I do think it’s beneficial because it really pushes you to say, “Here’s why we’re doing it.” And continually asking yourself, “Am I doing that? Am I striving to do that?” I’m not perfect. We’re never going to hit that ideal mark and it’s going to change every year with the kids. But, am I still trying? (T1)

Whether the feedback was supportive, evaluative, discussion, or simply just checking in, all participants believed it was necessary.
Need Accountability. Almost half of the participants perceived feedback as being held accountable. The administration needs to hold co-teachers accountable for co-planning, collaborating, and co-instructing. Several participants added:

And I think, honestly, holding us accountable is important. So, whether that's observations or whatever, I mean, it might be uncomfortable sometimes, but I think that's necessary for growth. (T2)

I think just continuing to give opportunities for educators to come together and to collaborate and, also, holding people accountable for that collaboration. I think having, whether it's like a document that they fill out, not to make more work, but for them to be able to showcase to the administration, "This is what we did with our time," because I know that that piece is huge. That if they're going to give us collaboration time, we need to make sure that it's being used as such. So, I think giving us focal points and things to focus on during the times that we meet I think can only help all of us feel more comfortable in this process. (T8)

Discussion for Structural Theme One: Communication

Effective communication was perceived as essential to the process of implementing effective inclusive education. The participants agreed that the increased communication between administration and teachers this year helped to improve co-teaching at the middle school. Bryk et al. (2010) found supportive relationships and communication between teachers and administration is critical for the transformation to an effective, inclusive school. Effective communication was perceived as essential between the co-teachers, but also between co-teachers and administration. Kugelmass (2001) in a study on sustaining inclusive education, found communication between
teachers and administration critical. Increased communication between the administration and co-teachers this past year provided clearer directions and expectations in understanding roles and responsibilities for participants. Beninghof (2016) found co-teaching relationships failed because co-teachers did not explicitly talk about sharing roles and responsibilities. Additional researchers stated when co-teachers are provided training that included planning and implementing co-teaching models, roles, and responsibilities, the teachers reported improvements in teaching (Embry & Dinnesen, 2013; Strogilos & Tragoulia, 2013). Furthermore, researchers found that the efficacy of co-teaching was enhanced when co-teachers understood their roles to effectively plan and implement activities (Berry et al., 2011; Isherwood & Barger-Anderson, 2008; Shaffer and Thomas-Brown, 2015; Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015). The participants perceived feedback as being held accountable. Davis et al. (2012) stated, “The bottom line in planning must be the accountability for implementing practices that ensure the academic and behavioral success of students with disabilities in the general education setting” (p. 225).

On-going feedback was listed as a perceived need by participants. Literature on effective inclusive education reveals the need for extensive, on-going feedback to support and encourage teachers throughout the co-teaching process (Corkum, Bryson, Smith, Giffen, & Hume, 2014; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman & Yoon, 2001; Kennedy & Shiel, 2010; Peterson, 2016; Polly, Neale, & Pugalee, 2013). Several participants mentioned how they appreciated additional advice from outside professionals. Murawski and Bernhardt (2016) noted that teachers often need to hear from outside experts to be
assured this is not another passing initiative. In addition, an outside expert may provide ongoing support throughout the process.

Within the data, the meaningful unit of accountability was referenced twenty-five times. The participants believed co-teachers should be held accountable to work collaboratively to meet the needs of all students in the inclusive classrooms. The participants also believed accountability needs to happen at multiple levels of the system. They believed that for inclusion to be successful in a co-taught classroom, the administration must hold co-teachers accountable to co-planning and co-instructing. Randhare Ashton (2014) found teacher accountability as a catalyst to changing a school’s culture from exclusion to one that is inclusionary.

Structural Theme Two: Supports

The participants believed that administrative support as well as collegial support would improve their instruction and strategies. It was evident that inclusive education should not be considered another add-on program but rather a system-wide way of thinking to meet the needs of all students in the school. The participants perceived supports as providing time to collaborate and co-plan as well as opportunities for professional development.

Need Time to Plan and Collaborate. For participants to move towards the desired change, professional development and additional training are required. Teacher 9 described how her co-planning improved their instruction co-teaching. She stated, “Because I think whenever we were able to work on things together, they turned out way better than when they weren't. And not that they were bad, but on the fly, is rarely as
good as when it's preplanned.” Teacher 8 shared her thoughts on having enough time to co-plan and collaborate with her co-teaching, he stated:

   It needs to be important that they're [co-teachers] given that time to collaborate because there are so many pieces to collaborate on. It's collaborating on the instruction, collaborating on student needs, the delivery process. I think it's really important. And the thing that I think teachers lack, unfortunately, is time to collaborate, I really think. Because collaboration is key. I think if you don’t have collaboration, then you're not co-teaching, and then an inclusive environment won't be successful for students.

Teacher 7 also had concerns about time constraints. She stated:

   I think probably the biggest thing right now for teachers is time. How do I find time to do one more thing in addition to what I'm doing right now? If you say to me as an administrator, "I'd like you to do this one more extra thing, and how can I help you to be successful? How can I provide you with the time to do this additional thing?" rather than saying, "Here's one more thing that I'd like you to do in addition to what you're already doing. And by the way, you don't get any extra time or any extra support in order to make this happen." That is overwhelming. It feels overwhelming. So, I guess I think time and training and support, not just in word but also in deed and in follow-through, is really important.
Teacher 12 believed having planning time would improve instruction, she wrote:

I just wish we had more time to talk and plan and work on modifications or in putting groups together or pairs--those kinds of things that I feel can be done more effectively if we just had more time.

Teacher 11 summarized the value of collaboration and co-planning, “I think it's just working together with that person, talking about students, talking about lessons, working out what we think is best, accepting people's thoughts and opinions. I know, for example, [teacher’s name] is very willing, and I said, ‘Hey, I don't think that lesson went very well. I want to try this tomorrow.’ And she's very open to doing those kinds of things. So, understanding that we have different strengths and weaknesses and stuff. But having that opportunity to talk is good.”

**Need Professional Development.** The emphasis on continuing professional development was a theme that emerged throughout data. Teacher 9 believed the additional professional development helped this past year, he explained, “And this year with having the district put a little bit more emphasis on it or importance on it, an importance of wanting it to work and giving us some training and some guiding.” Other participants recognized the need for additional professional development and training opportunities. Teacher 7 suggested observing other co-teachers or having an outside expert as beneficial. She stated:

I think one thing that’s a possibility is to provide an opportunity for additional training. The opportunity to watch other people and watch other people work in an inclusive setting. I think I personally felt and I said it when we had our year-
end meeting, to me it was really helpful to have you come in from the outside as someone who is an objective observer.

Teacher 5 believed training needs to be consistent and on-going:

There has to be more consistency and, I think, more training. When I look at our staff, we have a lot of young, young staff. And so those of us who have that institutional memory, people can look at that as good or bad, I guess. But it seems, since we've started this, we've just not had the continued guidance.

Some participants believed professional development should include opportunities to observe other co-taught classrooms. For example, teacher 12 said:

Honestly, I think being able to go observe somebody else, I mean, is more-- I mean, the feedback is always valuable, and being observed is always valuable. But something like this part of me feels like I like to see how-- other ways other people are doing it as well. And the feedback, but giving me the chance to go be in other rooms and watch and see and then try to apply maybe some other things that I'm missing.

Teacher 10 provided additional thoughts on the benefits of observing other co-taught classrooms, He stated:

Let them [co-teachers] go out and observe. Let them [co-teachers] see what it really looks like because you can read a lot of things in a textbook and you can go through and people can come in and tell you, but go out and see it. Watch it in the classroom. Watch it when it works, and also watch it when maybe it's not as successful and learn from it. But watch what it looks like. And it could be because that's how I learn, I learn by the visual parts. And so, going in and watch teachers
that do it the right way. I've been to lots of workshops on co-teaching, sitting in a conference room going, all right, here's what co-teaching is, these are the models of co-teaching. And to me, thank you, I like the information, but I want to see it.

**Discussion for Structural Theme Two: Support**

The participants believed administrators need to support the practice of co-teaching. This finding is heavily supported in the literature. Throughout inclusive education literature, successful co-teaching implementation is dependent on an administration that is supportive and invested in co-teaching (Leatherman, 2009; Nierengarten & Hughes, 2010; Santoli et al., 2008; Scruggs et al., 2007). Participants described the needed supports to include time to collaborate and co-plan. The literature on effective inclusionary practices found co-teachers improved their instructional skills, increased their use of effective strategies, and became better teachers when they collaborated and co-planned with their co-teacher (Mastropieri et al. 2005).

The participants also indicated that when they did not co-plan adequately, their lessons were not as effective. It is not surprising because research indicates that co-planning is essential for the success of co-taught classrooms to ensure co-teachers are working in tandem for the ultimate success of students (Dieker, 2001; Mastropieri et at, 2005). Additionally, insufficient planning may lead special education teachers to be the assistants and not actively involved in the instruction (Mastropieri, 2005). Murawski and Hughes (2009) stated, “The more teachers can collaborate and share the strategies on which they have been trained in their respective fields, the more likely that students in the general classroom will truly benefit from strong research-based instruction” (p. 271).
To improve the quality of co-teaching, the participants expressed the need for more training and on-going professional development. McLeskey and Waldon (2015) stated a must-have for an effective, inclusive school is to incorporate a school-based system of professional development. In addition, Gebbie, Ceglowski, Taylor, and Miels (2012) stated, “Professional development for teachers has been one of the primary ways of enhancing practice” (p. 36). Research has shown that professional development that leads to improvement in the classroom is (a) individualized and customized, (b) ongoing and sustained over time, and (c) inclusion of outside expertise (Domitrovich et al., 2009; Embury & Dinnesen, 2013; Kennedy & Shiel, 2010; Kozleski et al., 2015; McLeskey, 2011; Shaffer & Thomas-Brown, 2015; Shoulders & Krei, 2016; Waldron & Walsh, 2010; Walsh, 2012). The participants desired opportunities to observe other inclusive classrooms and co-teachers within the school. Murawski and Bernhardt (2016) concluded exemplary co-teaching teams should be celebrated in schools and other teams should have opportunities to observe them.

**Structural Theme Three: Commitment**

A recurrent factor that emerged from the data was the need for the administration to demonstrate the commitment to inclusive education. The participants described commitment as the need for the administration to keep co-teaching a priority and stay consistent each year to sustaining and expanding co-teaching in the middle school.

**Need to Prioritize.** The participants believed administration needed to regard co-teaching as a high-ranking priority. Teacher 10 explained:

> Priorities. What do they value? And if they really valued the kids-- and this might be harsh to say but if you really valued the kids, if you came into our co-taught
classroom you would go, I would want co-taught classroom in every classroom because it benefits every kid that's in this classroom. Every kid gets a benefit in this classroom. And I can't say that with my regular education classroom. I can't say that in my rooms that aren't co-taught. Because with 32 kids, it's hard for me, just me, to give them the same experience that they get in a co-taught room. It's not close. And so, I think if the district really, really valued the kids they would look at co-teaching and go, “Let's fund it. It's worth it for us to do that. It's worth it for us to go through and spend some of our fund balance to bring in some teachers who are doing it the right way and let them build it.”

Teacher 9 believed the school was moving in the right direction because of the importance placed on co-teaching.

I would say we’re definitely moving in the right direction. I like the importance that we’re putting on it, and that it’s expanding to all the houses next year as opposed to something that’s just happening in a couple of houses…I see the benefits of having two teachers in that class is great. I would welcome it in all of my classes.

Several participants stated there needs to be school leaders who are willing to stand up for inclusion. The participants shared:

So, I think, number one, there has to be someone in leadership. And maybe it's multiple people in leadership who are willing to say, "Yes, we know that this costs the most money, but it is also the best thing for kids." And not just kids who have an identified learning disability, but it's the best thing for all kids because not all learning is academic. Some of it is preparation for the rest of your life. So, I
think there has to be somebody in-- there have to be people in leadership roles who identify that and are willing to defend the co-teaching model. (T7)

Validation from the district [administration], don’t forget this is still important to us. Don’t forget we still care about this. Because as you know and every teacher in education knows, we have grand ideas, we roll out initiatives, and so many times they fall away, and we’re like, “Wait. What? What happened to that thing that we were all supposed to do?” I would say if you were to look for something to keep sustainability, to keep it as a priority, continue to say, “Yep. It sounds like hashing the same old same old, but this is important. You need to do this.” (T1)

I know that costs money, but I want the district to say, “Hey, if you’re a co-teacher we’re going to set aside this time within your day because this is important.” I would say that number one. (T6)

Also, several participants shared the importance of appropriate students with and without disabilities ratio in co-taught classrooms. Teacher 9 explained, “I think the biggest thing would be to keep that balance. Not let it be a dumping ground for-- keep it a protected class I really think is what it needs to-- and I know that scheduling is really hard and when we get students sometimes that's where it goes. But I feel like that balance is really crucial to keeping it an effective, normal, mainstream class. That we need to have that balance kept and we need to-- or ratio, however, you want to call it. And then I think it needs to remain a protected time.”

**Need Consistency.** The participants appreciated when school leaders demonstrated consistency. Teacher 6 stated a belief that seemed to permeate throughout
interviews, “The teachers are looking for a commitment from the administration to say, this is what we’re going to do, and this is important, and we’re going to put money behind it. We expect results.” Several participants shared reflections on how important consistency was to them. Teacher 2 stated, “And keeping people and supporting them and doing what we can to continue to kind of keep our eye on a limited number of goals. I think is vital to not losing track of things.” Several teachers believed consistency in co-teaching goals is very important from year to year.

If they didn't have any intent for us to do this next year, why do we do this if again, the ball's going to get dropped and nothing's going to carry through? I feel like there should be some consistency and if that's going to be-- if that's [name of school] then that needs to be consistent. (T12)

I think that's part of our school fault because of the fact that it really up until this year has not been a big focus. I mean, it's like, "Yeah, we're going to do it." But I don't think other than, "Yeah, we're going to do it, so make sure you make it happen," has been replaced with, "Yeah, we're going to do it. How are we going to do it? How can you make it happen? And it's going to be consistent." I mean, because I think I would've had a different perspective on this if we're going to be like, "Well, we're going to do it this year, and then next year we'll figure out what we're going to do then." (T4)

**Discussion for Structural Theme Three: Commitment**

The last underlying theme across all participants was the importance of mutual commitment between co-teaching and school leader with the administration. The participants believed the administration needed to regard co-teaching as a high-ranking
priority. Not surprising, as research revealed supportive administration is a key component of effective inclusive education (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Sailor & McCart, 2014; Shogren et al., 2015). Theoharis & Causton (2014) stated, “School leaders are instrumental figures in creating and carrying out a vision for inclusive schools” (p. 82). Several participants described priority as keeping appropriate ratios of students with IEPs in co-taught classrooms. Administrators need to avoid having more than 30 percent of a general education class designated as having students with disabilities (Murawski and Dieker, 2013; Zigmond & Magiera, 2002) to maintain heterogeneity in the classroom.

The participants appreciated when school leaders demonstrated consistency. The participants felt if co-teaching was what they are asked to do, they wanted consistency from year to year. Likewise, if co-teaching partnerships were working, they felt it was important for the administration to find ways to keep co-teachers together. Murawski & Dieker (2013) support their view and recommend that administrators find ways to keep co-teaching partnerships together.

The participants identified open communication, administration supports and ongoing commitment as the structural elements needed to sustain and improve inclusive education in the middle school. The participant desired feedback, opportunities for training and professional development, time for planning and collaborating, and commitment from administrations as structures needed to support their continued efforts as effective co-teachers.
Co-teaching is a productive use of two knowledgeable professionals combining their expertise to benefit students. The participants in the study found co-teaching to be a promising approach to provide quality inclusive education students with disabilities. The participants believed through the process of co-teaching the quality of their instruction improved. They believed co-teaching provided opportunities for personal and professional growth. Finally, they believed their relationships with their co-teaching partner was key to their success as co-teachers. To sustain and improve inclusive education in the middle school, the participants needed the structural elements of open communication, administration supports, and ongoing commitments. The overall essence was that participants viewed the relationships and collaborative interactions with their co-teachers as a means to address the complexity and dynamics of co-teaching.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study provided insight into the complexity of strengthening, sustaining, and expanding inclusive education in a middle school setting. The overall essence of the study revealed that the participants viewed the significance of relationships and the need for ever-closer collaboration and connectedness as the means to address the complexity and dynamics of co-teaching. This chapter presents conclusions, addresses the research questions and provides recommendations for co-teachers and administrators working to strengthen, sustain, and expand inclusive education within their schools. The chapter concludes with limitations of the study and directions for future research.

Conclusions

The spirit of inclusive education involves providing equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities in the least restrictive setting. It is about “separate is not equal” and providing full access. It is about creating environments in which children with disabilities can learn best and feel welcomed and accepted. Inclusive education is embracing and celebrating differences. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees the right of individuals with disabilities to be educated in the least restrictive environment. Not only is inclusive education a socially just practice, it is also the individual’s civil right. The benefits of inclusion provide compelling evidence of improvements in social, academic, and behavioral skills for students with disabilities.
when educated in inclusive classrooms (Feldman et al., 2015; Hoppey, 2016; Strogilos & Stefanidis, 2015; Walsh, 2012). Although the practice of inclusive education has increased in public schools, the promise of equity and excellence in addressing the needs of students with disabilities in the general education setting is still a national concern (Kozleski et al., 2013).

As schools move towards a more inclusive model of supporting students with disabilities, inclusive education has proven very difficult to strengthen, sustain, and expand (McLesky & Waldron, 2006). Researchers in the field of inclusive education state that implementing and sustaining inclusive education is one of the most complex and demanding reforms in schools today (McLeskey & Waldron, 2006; Sindelar et al., 2006). As a special education professional, I can personally verify the challenges of implementing and sustaining inclusive education. But far more important, I have witnessed incredible transformations of individuals with disabilities who benefited from inclusive education. To me, inclusive education is not just an educational practice; it has been my life’s philosophy. I believe inclusive education is about valuing individuals’ strengths as well as differences and limitations.

The purpose of the study was to bring together the voices of co-teachers actively engaged in co-teaching in order to identify structural elements needed to strengthen, sustain and expand inclusive education. Thirteen participants who were part of a new model of inclusive education implemented by the district’s administration participated in the study. The goal of the new model was to improve collaboration and co-teaching strategies with the hope of strengthening, sustaining and promoting wider-scale adoption of inclusive education within the school district. Through semi-structured interviews, the
participants shared experiences of how they adapted to the changing conditions and demands of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms.

**Research Question One**

The first research question asked how the co-teachers perceived and described their co-teaching experiences in a middle school. Four textural themes emerged that represented the essence of the co-teachers’ experiences: (a) participants believed in the philosophy of inclusive education, (b) participants believed the quality of their instruction improved as the result of co-teaching, (c) participants perceived relationships were key to their success as co-teachers, and (d) participants experienced personal and professional growth. Figure 8 presents the textural themes drawn from the analysis of data. In summary, the participants described positive experiences and valued inclusive education.

The participants described the experiences of co-teaching with optimism. The philosophical belief of welcoming the students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms was shared by all participants. Inclusive education was defined as providing opportunities for students with disabilities to access quality education equitable to peers. The expectations for students with disabilities increased as the result of co-teaching. The participants characterized inclusive classrooms as nurturing environments in which learners with disabilities thrived but also benefited learners without disabilities.

Identified benefits of co-teaching were improvements in the quality of instruction. The participants credited the impact of two experts in the classroom to the enhancement of their instruction. They believed that students benefited from the individualized supports and instruction. Student/teacher contact time increased due to flexible grouping of students. Additionally, inclusive classrooms were recognized as unique environments
that allowed co-teachers to fulfill the obligation of providing differentiated instruction in a collaborative manner.

The participants agreed the co-teachers’ relationships were central to their success as co-teachers. They not only addressed the quality of the co-teachers’ relationships, but also the nurturing that needed to take place. Feelings of nervousness and uncertainty were described by the participants at the start of the co-teaching relationships but improved as the co-teachers became more comfortable with one other. Positive co-teaching relationships contributed to increased collaboration and establishing parity for both teachers in the classroom.

The participants experienced personal and professional growth due to co-teaching. Growth in interpersonal skills was realized in the areas of risk-taking, flexibility, and open-mindedness. These skills were believed to increase the co-teachers’ ability to adapt to their new roles and responsibilities as co-teachers. The participants flourished professionally because they learned from one another and welcomed opportunities to share the expertise and talents that co-teaching presented.

### Research Question One

How do co-teachers (general education teachers and special education teachers) perceive and describe their co-teaching experiences in a middle school?

- Participants valued inclusive education
- Participants believed the quality of their instruction improved
- Participants believed relationships were fundamental to co-teaching
- Participants experienced personal and professional growth

Figure 8. Map Representing Textural Themes Drawn from the Analysis of Data
Research Question Two

The second research question focused on identifying structural elements within a middle school that co-teachers deemed necessary to strengthen, sustain, and expand inclusive education. Three structural elements emerged for sustaining inclusive education: effective communication, administrative support, and administration committed to inclusive education. Figure 9 presents the structural themes drawn from the analysis of data. The themes are linked to the co-teachers need for ever-closer collaboration and increased connectedness as a means to support the co-teaching process.

Creating a culture of open and ongoing communication between co-teachers and administration, and the co-teachers themselves was regarded as vitally important. Effective communication provided opportunities to share key information such as district wide goals and objectives, roles and expectations, and accomplishments. The participants looked to the administration to provide ongoing feedback and several shared frustration that they were not observed throughout the year. This was disappointing to them as they felt ongoing coaching and feedback was critical to improving their performance as co-teachers. They also expected co-teachers to be held accountable. They were willing to accept the responsibilities of co-planning and co-teaching, but clear limits, expectations, and constructive feedback would have been welcomed from the administration.

Although the participants provided examples of successful co-teaching accounts during the school year and shared anecdotes of improvements in students’ outcomes in the inclusive classrooms, they listed several supports needed in their desire to continue to improve. Time to co-plan was expressed by participants as critical in their quest to improve co-teaching. The participants credited co-planning with improved instruction
and parity between the co-teachers. Also, they believed if the administration valued inclusive education, professional development and additional training specific should be provided.

Finally, the participants affirmed that a committed administration was critical to their success as co-teachers. There were several areas identified by the participants that they believed demonstrated commitment by the administration. These included prioritization of inclusive education, ensuring that an inclusive classroom had less than 1/3 of the class identified as students with special needs, and respecting co-teacher’s time in the co-taught classroom (i.e., not scheduling IEP meetings during co-teaching times). Finally, consistency from year to year was mentioned repeatedly – participants believed it was important for administration to stay the course with co-teaching – to stay committed.

**Figure 9. Map Representing Structural Themes Drawn from the Analysis of Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question Two</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What structural elements of a middle school do co-teachers (general education teachers and special education teachers) engaged in co-teaching perceive as necessary to strengthen, sustain, and expand inclusive education?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Participants needed the structure of communication
- Participants needed the structure of supports
- Participants needed the structure of commitment

**Moving Forward: The Complexity and Dynamics of Co-Teaching**

Complexity theory provided the theoretical framework to study the dynamic interworking of a school system while focusing on the interactions between the systems’ components from which the new behaviors emerged (Davis & Sumara, 2006; Mason, 2008; Morrison, 2008; Radford, 2006; Snyder, 2013). Complexity theory had important implications for understanding how the co-teachers in the middle school interacted and
self-organized when faced with the complex phenomenon of improving and sustaining inclusive education. Two assumptions set forth by the complexity perspective guided this study; inclusive education is a complex phenomenon, and the middle school functioned as a complex system.

**Inclusive Education as a Complex Phenomenon**

A basic assumption underpinning this study maintained that inclusive education is a complex phenomenon (see Table 2). Complex inclusive education phenomenon differs from simple or complicated phenomenon. We can make sense of a simple phenomenon quickly and easily. It usually involves following a set of instructions to reach a predictable outcome. An example might be following a recipe to bake a cake or reading directions to assemble a toy. With a complicated phenomenon, higher order thinking is needed to solve the problem. A complicated phenomenon may have several causes, but a cause is eventually discovered which leads directly to the problem. Once a problem is solved it remains solved. An example of a complicated phenomenon is Newton’s Law of Gravitation. A complex phenomenon is quite different as there is no link between cause and effect; therefore, there is no way of determining or pinpointing exact causes or outcomes. A complex phenomenon has no single solution “that holds the key to successful implementation” (Snyder, p. 9). Inclusive education is an example of a complex phenomenon in that every student is unique, what works for one student is not guaranteed to work for another. Hence, there is no certainty of outcomes or causes.

**Middle School as a Complex System**

The middle school setting in this study was a complex, adaptive system (Mason, 2008; Morrison, 2008) comprised of a large number of elements (e.g., co-teachers,
students, curriculum, administrators) that operated simultaneously in order to self-organize and adapt to the new inclusion model being implemented by the school district.

As co-teachers interacted and relationships developed, new behaviors emerged and created patterns of self-organization.

**Complexity Theory: Relationships, Feedback, and Emergence of New Behaviors**

The key principles of the complexity theory provided the context to investigate inclusive education in the middle school of the study. The key principles: (a) the behaviors of complex systems are constituted through *relationships*, (b) given a significant degree of complexity, new behaviors *emerge*, and (c) *feedback* loops serve as drivers for change (Cilliars, 2000; Mason, 2008; Morrison, 2010; Snyder, 2013), presented the focus to help identify the emergent structures of the school system that the participants felt were important. Examples and descriptions of the new behaviors driven by relationships and feedback may offer possibilities to school districts trying to implement, sustain, and expand effective inclusive education. In the following section, the key principles are described simultaneously as each are profoundly dependent on each other. Figure 10 presents a model how co-teachers’ interactions driven through feedback leads to new emergent collective behaviors enabling the expansion of co-teaching.
Relationships

Complexity theory states that changes are driven by relationships (Cilliars, 2000; Mason, 2008; Morrison, 2010). New behaviors emerge because of the relationships and interconnectedness among the elements within the system. Also, relationships and interconnectedness affect all levels of a system in that “each function in relation to others, some more closely linked, others more distant for each other, ultimately all are interdependent for the survival of the organization of a whole” (Radford, 2006, p. 184).

The participants perceived the relationships with their co-teaching partners as a defining factor to their success as co-teachers. They described co-teaching partnerships as “meshing,” “strong,” “a marriage,” and “kind of a bond.” One participant stated, “You have to take the time to have a relationship… then it just makes it [work], everything else
just follows.” The emergence of new behaviors resulted from the interactions and interconnectedness of the co-teachers. The changes were further influenced by the meaning and value the co-teachers placed on inclusive education (Cilliers, 2000). In the study, the co-teachers shared common purpose and vision, which helped to drive the co-teachers in the same direction. As the co-teachers’ relationships strengthened, the boundaries separating their identities (i.e., general education teacher and special education teacher) began to dissolve allowing for collective sense-making and encouraged further growth (e.g., increased student expectations, quality of instruction improved, expanded interpersonal skills).

The dynamics of a complex system were clearly at work, as the interconnectedness and relationships had a rippling affect to other nested layers of the school system. In the individual student level of the school system, students demonstrated improved outcomes. In the grade specific level of the school system, the co-teachers modeled and shared instructional strategies learned in co-taught classrooms to the other teachers across the grade level. Refer to figure 2 to view the nested levels that existed within the school system in the study.

**Feedback**

The spontaneous process of change and growth of complex systems results from positive feedback (Mason, 2008). To foster the interconnectedness and relationships among the elements in a school system, effective feedback by means of on-going communication and collaboration was essential. Initially, feedback loops may seem insignificant but as feedback loops grow larger and affect more and more of the system members, they eventually lead to the lock-in of a phenomenon (Mason, 2008, Morrison,
2006). This was evidenced as feedback loops influenced the implementation of co-teaching in the study.

Feedback loops indisputably reinforced the practice of co-teaching for the participants of the study. Witnessing the positive effects of co-teaching (e.g., improved student outcomes, smaller student-teacher ratio) served as feedback loops for the co-teachers. Supportive co-teachers’ relationships and observing students thriving served as feedback loops that drove the further advancement of co-teaching. In addition, the co-teachers experienced the power of feedback loops when collaborating and sharing expertise. Again, the dynamics of the complex system was at work, collaborative and productive co-teachers’ relationships and improved students’ outcomes served as positive feedback loops that influenced the further growth of effective co-teaching practices for the participants. The success of co-teaching as a whole served as a feedback on the co-teachers, further changing their behaviors.

As the practice of co-teaching evolved, it became apparent to the co-teachers that to continue to improve they would need constructive feedback and opportunities for professional development. Supporting the notion that a complex system is never stagnant, on-going feedback and additional training would facilitate the spontaneous process of change leading to self-reinforcement of the practice of co-teaching.

**Emergence of New Behaviors**

One of the most important understandings drawn from the complexity theory is the notion of the emergence of new behaviors. Mason (2008) explained the concept of emergence of new behaviors as, “Given a sufficient degree of complexity in a particular environment, new (and to some extent unexpected) properties and behaviors emerge” (p.
The interactions and relationships of the co-teachers fed by feedback lead to the collected emergence of improved co-teaching practices. As the co-teachers self-organized and adapted to their new roles in the inclusive classrooms, interpersonal skills such as risk-taking, flexibility, and open-mindedness emerged. Similarly, as the co-teachers collaborated to address the students’ individual needs, instruction and professional skills improved.

Complexity theory states that no change occurs in a vacuum, what happens in one level (i.e., individual classroom) triggers changes across other levels (i.e., individual student) of the school system. Most certainly, the new instructional strategies of the co-teachers resulted in improved student outcomes. Additionally, the co-teachers revealed how they shared techniques learned in the co-taught classrooms to other teachers within the middle school. Throughout the co-teachers’ interviews was evidence that the emergence of new behaviors was strengthened and nourished through interconnected relationships and feedback loops. As the principles of complexity theory denote, the co-teachers’ ability to adapt was interdependent on their survival and the survival of inclusive education in the middle school as a whole system (Mason, 2008; Morrison, 2008; Snyder, 2013).

**Implication for Practice**

Generalizability is not the aim of qualitative research; rather the purpose is to gain an understanding of the experience from the participants’ perspectives. However, the findings of the study could provide insight into factors that may apply to school leaders who are trying to improve, sustain, and widen inclusive education. Some generalizations were made by the co-teachers of what needs to be in place for effective co-teaching to
happen. For the most part, the suggestions were framed as collective possibilities.

Barriers, such as a lack of professional development specifically related to co-teaching and a lack of planning time, were identified by co-teachers as having a negative impact on continued change and growth.

Administration – It is important for administrators to understand the complexity of a school system and the collected properties of relationships, feedback and emergence. The administrators may then organize structural elements and fashion feedback in a favorable direction towards improved co-teaching.

It will be important to focus on the development and interrelationships of all levels of the system, most importantly the co-teachers. Considering the co-teachers’ underlying values, beliefs, and philosophy is of importance. For co-teachers to move towards the desired change, professional development and additional training will need to be provided to support teachers in their changing professional roles. It is imperative that co-teachers receive ongoing and constructive feedback from each other as well as from administration. Lastly, co-teachers need a structure that allows for co-planning. Focusing on increasing professional development, co-planning, and feedback will influence the momentum towards effective and sustainable co-teaching.

For school districts to move towards effective and sustainable inclusive education, leaders need to involve teachers in a bottom-up, system-wide, and collaborative approach that values the input of all persons (Danforth, 2014; McMaster, 2013). Administrators must create opportunities for shared decision making within all levels of the system. McLeskey and Waldron (2002) explained, “Change must be supported by the administration (top-down) as well as by teachers who implement the change (bottom-
up)” (p. 66). Encouraging collaborative practices will allow change to expand to other levels of the system and promote sustainability (Snyder, 2013). Therefore, it will be important to create safe environments in which teachers are supported and valued. Communication should be based on trust and openness and continue throughout the school year – fostering a collaborative environment for everyone, especially the co-teachers.

*Co-teachers* – Kozleski et al. (2015) stated, “The basis of powerful relationships relies on the ability of teachers to support each other in their work and act as inspirations for each other” (p. 218). It will be important to begin by defining roles and responsibilities. This can be accomplished through open and honest communication, planning for individual responsibilities, and allowing co-teachers to blend their different perspectives and knowledge. Positive relationships will be strengthened through feedback. Collaboration and co-planning will encourage the expansion of instructional strategies that can be used by students with disabilities to access the general education curriculum more effectively.

**Limitations**

The uniqueness of the middle school’s inclusion model of delivery and the co-teachers’ experiences may limit the transferability of the findings to other schools. The participant make-up of the sample (nine general education teachers and four special education teachers, eight women and five men) represented the perspectives of co-teachers. Only co-teachers engaged in co-teaching at the middle school were asked to participate in the study, consequently, more general educators volunteered which presented an unequal ratio of general education and special education participants. Due to
purposeful sampling and participant volunteering, one could assume the participants were interested in the success of co-teaching – which could have potentially affected the results. The participants’ positive views that were apparent throughout the data may be credited to the volunteer nature of recruitment.

Another limitation was present in student demographics of the inclusive classrooms involved in the study. The inclusion model for the middle school was limited to students with mild disabilities. The time constraints of the school day posed an additional limitation. By being cognizant of co-teachers’ time, interviews were limited to 45 minutes or less; at the end of the time limits, there was a sense that the interview could have been extended because the co-teacher had more information to share. Finally, my experiences and beliefs related to the value of inclusive education, and positioning as an instructional coach within the school district, could have influenced participants and analysis throughout the study. However, I took considerable measures to minimize the impact by bracketing, member checking, and keeping a record of potential bias or predispositions.

**Directions for Future Research**

The study was designed to contribute to the body of literature related to the sustainability of inclusive education for students with disabilities. As the school district adapts the structures of communication, supports, and commitment, further research is needed to examine the sustainability and whether the school district was able to expand inclusive education into other school buildings within the district.

More research is needed to investigate systematic changes within a middle school system using the key principles of complexity theory: (a) relationships, (b) emergent
behaviors, and (c) feedback loops. By increasing the involvement and connectedness on as many levels as possible within the system, reflecting a bottom-up approach, research is needed to study whether or not inclusive education would take hold more broadly throughout the system and be more self-sustaining. More research is needed to provide insight into how the principles of complexity can be generalizable to other settings.

The main benefit that co-teachers expressed was a sense of empowerment from the relationships that they were able to build with each other while engaging in the practice of co-teaching. The strengthened relationships fostered an increase in their level of personal commitment to the process. Supporting each other allowed the co-teachers to support their students in ways they could never do alone. The need for co-teaching is real; it is important to acknowledge that both teachers and students showed improvements due to the implementation of co-teaching. Strengthened relationships and positive outcomes are what will sustain them going forth and allow them to maintain momentum. The continued practice of co-teaching will allow the cycle of building relationships, engaging with feedback, and emerging new behaviors to continue. My personal commitment to the lives of individuals with disabilities leads me to the practice of co-teaching. This personal commitment is what has inspired me to encourage others to engage in co-teaching. The results of this research further solidify that co-teaching is the right thing to do.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol
Inclusive Education: An Exploration of the Experiences of Middle School Teachers’ Participating in a Co-teaching Model

__________________________________________

Interview Code:____________________________

I. Digital recorder tested and spare batteries available.

II. Verify consent form has been signed.

III. Review purpose of the interview:
[The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of inclusive educators (e.g., general education teachers, special education teachers) engaged in co-teaching and collaboration to help leaders strengthen, sustain and expand inclusive education for all students with disabilities. Please read the consent form. I will audio record the interview and provide you with a copy of the transcription to review for accuracy. There is a minimal risk of feeling discomfort when talking about working environment, colleagues or sharing dissatisfaction (if any). You may choose to discontinue the interview at any time.]

IV. About the interview:
Date:____________________ Time:____________________
Location:____________________
Interview Questions

1) Define inclusive education.
   • Describe your philosophy as an inclusive educator.
   • Describe a defining moment as an inclusive educator. (Someone might ask me what I mean by a defining moment…so I will be prepared to have an explanation for this.)
   • Describe qualities of an effective inclusive educator.

2) Define co-teaching.
   • Describe your responsibilities as a co-teacher.

3) Define collaboration as it relates to inclusive education.
   • What is your role in the collaborative process? (interpersonal interactions, communications, and relationship building)
   • In the context of inclusive education, who do you collaborate with?
     o Can you share an experience collaborating with listed above?
   • Can you describe a situation in which you shared decision making this past year (co-teacher, principal, other administrators)?
   • Share an experience in which you and your co-teaching partner encountered a barrier or an obstacle co-teaching.
     o How did you overcome the barrier or obstacle?

4) Describe the teaching practices you use as a co-teacher.
   • Before this year, what teaching practices did you use to effectively include students with disabilities into your inclusive classroom?
   • What teaching practices have you included this year?
   • What teaching practices would you like to include next year? What actions are likely to help you move forward?
   • Do you have a preference on a co-teaching model, if so why?

5) Describe what inclusive education looks like in your school.
   • How could you enhance or utilize resources and processes already present in your school to improve the effectiveness of inclusive education?
   • How can you build on current structures of inclusive education in your school to make it more sustainable?
   • If you were talking to a colleague from another school who was working to improve inclusive education, what advice would you give them?

6) Describe any unexpected or unsought discoveries you experienced this past year.
   • Share a story of personal growth or discovery.

V. Close Interview
   ● After 45 minutes, the researcher will end the interview.
   ● The participants will be thanked.
   ● Assure him/her of confidentiality.
   ● Remind about member-checking.
   ● Immediately following interview the researcher will record thoughts, reflections, and insights as well as potential bias in reflexive journal.
• If certain passages are unclear from the first interview, I will return at a later date to ask for more descriptions. I will follow the same interview protocol, questions may vary based on the need.
### Research Study Request Form

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Required Approval</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Signature</th>
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<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td>Other Admin</td>
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<td>3/17/17</td>
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</table>

Please indicate reactions to this project in writing to the Superintendent or designee.

Name: Shirley Johnson  
Date: 03/07/2017  
Address: [Redacted]
6. Have you conducted previous studies in the [Redacted] Area Public Schools? Yes ___ No X
   If yes, give sufficient information about the most recent or pertinent study so that it can be located,
   i.e., date, who your contact was and title of nature of the study.

7. List the names of all personnel who will be involved in carrying out field operations.
   Shirley Johnson - mentor for new teachers and co-teaching coach for [Redacted] Public School

8. Do you have any objection to publicity of your study at this time? Yes ___ No X

9. Do you have the support of your supervisor? (For staff members only) Yes X ___ No ___

10. If you have a formal research proposal, please include it with this request.
    Attached please find research proposal

    If this request is granted, I agree to abide by School Board Policy 922 and Administrative Procedures
    for implementation.

    Signature of Researcher Shirley Johnson Date 3/24/17
    Institution of Higher Education University of North Dakota
    Signature of Advisor [Redacted] Dr. Chassner Date 3/24/17

    Return to:
    Superintendent

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1. DATE OF STUDY:
March 2017 until December 2017

2. PURPOSE OF STUDY:
The purpose of the study is to explore the perspectives of stakeholders (i.e., school administrators, general education teachers, special education teachers) engaged in the inclusive education reform effort at Middle School to help stakeholders create safe, challenging classrooms that contribute to the quality of life for all students with disabilities.

3. What research are you making of the Area Public Schools? Give specific information on sampling, measuring instrument, time schedule, amount of time required by staff, and number and names of schools to be involved (if known). If nonstandardized instruments are to be used, please attach copies.

I will use purposive sampling to assure participants are able to share information of the inclusive education reform effort at the middle school. Therefore, in the study, three to four administrators, three to four general education teachers, and three to four special education teachers, who have been engaged in the reform effort this past school year at Middle School, will be recruited. I will interview all participants within school buildings. Interviews are expected to last 30 to 45 minutes. Following the interviews, participants will be asked to review interview transcripts for accuracy.

4. If you have discussed this proposal with Area Public School personnel, indicate whom you have talked to and the name of your discussion.

Assistant Superintendent of Learning and Accountability, shared my plan briefly for feedback.

5. What practical implications does your study have for the Area Public School system?
(If none, say none, but describe what value the study may have for children in general.)

Analysis of stakeholders’ perspectives engaged in the inclusive education reform effort is needed to better understand the collaborative process crucial to sustaining inclusive education. Further, the information may assist the district’s effort in scaling up inclusive education into other buildings within the district. The benefits of inclusive education provides compelling evidence of academic, behavioral, and social gains for students with disabilities when special education services are provided in the general education setting. Students will benefit from successful inclusive education within the district.
APPENDIX C
CONSENT FORM

The University of North Dakota
Consent to Participate in Research

TITLE: Inclusive Education: An Exploration of the Experiences of Middle School Teachers’ Participating in a Co-teaching Model

PROJECT DIRECTOR: Shirley Johnson
PHONE # 701-388-3885

DEPARTMENT: Teaching and Learning

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH

The researcher conducting this study is Shirley Johnson. If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact Shirley Johnson at the information above. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at 701(777-4279).

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of inclusive educators (e.g., general education teachers, special education teachers) engaged in co-teaching and collaboration to help leaders strengthen, sustain and expand inclusive education for all students with disabilities. You are being asked to participate because of your experience co-teaching and collaborating in the middle school of this study. As a participant you will be asked to interview with the researcher for approximately 30 to 60 minutes. If certain passages are unclear, I will request a follow up interview at a later date to ask for more descriptions. If you are willing, the interview(s) will be taped for the purpose of review and transcription.
HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?
Approximately ten to twelve inclusive educators engaged in co-teaching and collaboration in the middle school will be recruited to participate in the study. The participants will be recruited using purposeful sampling.

HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THIS STUDY?
Your participation in this study will include two individual interviews lasting approximately 30 to 60 minutes. The overall study will last no longer than 1 year.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?
You will answer asking questions related to your knowledge, skills, and dispositions towards inclusive education reform.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?
There is a minimal risk of feeling discomfort when talking about working environment, colleagues or sharing dissatisfaction (if any). If you feel uncomfortable you may stop the or choose not to participate at any time. These risks are not viewed as being in excess of “minimal risk.” If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings about this study, you are encouraged to contact the HR department of the school.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?
The benefit of this study will be bringing the voices of the inclusive educators (e.g., general education teachers, special education teachers) together in order to identify and understand key concepts needed to strengthen, sustain and expand inclusive education.

ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY
This section is not applicable to this study.

WILL IT COST ME ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?
You will not have any costs for being in this research study.

WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?
You will not be paid for participating in the study.
WHO IS FUNDING THE STUDY?

The University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified. Your study record may be reviewed by Government agencies, the UND Research Development and Compliance office, and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board.

Any information that is obtained in this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Any identifying information about you will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the principal investigator’s office. In addition, to make sure information is correct, you will be offered a summary of interview in order to check for accuracy. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of anonymous transcripts of all interviews. You have the right to review and edit all transcripts. Consent forms will be kept in a locked and secure location with only the primary researcher having access to the consent forms and personal data. After 3 years, all data will be destroyed.

If there is a written report or article about this study, I will describe the study results in a summarized manner so that you cannot be identified.

IS THIS STUDY VOLUNTARY?

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS?

The researcher conducting this study is Shirley Johnson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact Shirley Johnson at 701-388-3885. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact The University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279 or UND.irb@research.UND.edu.

- You may also call this number about any problems, complaints, or concerns you have about this research study.
● You may also call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone who is independent of the research team.
● General information about being a research subject can be found by clicking “Information for Research Participants” on the web site: http://und.edu/research/resources/human-subjects/research-participants.cfm

I give consent to be audio recorded during this study.

Please initial:  ____ Yes  ____ No

I give consent for my quotes to be used in the research; however I will not be identified.

Please initial:  ____ Yes  ____ No

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subjects Name: ______________________________________________________

_________________________________________  Date  ___________ -- ______

Signature of Subject  Date

I have discussed the above points with the subject or, where appropriate, with the subject’s legally authorized representative.

_________________________________________  Date

Signature of Person Who Obtained Consent  Date
Dear Co-teacher,

I hope you are experiencing a rewarding school year. You are receiving this email because your school’s administration has agreed to assist me in completing my dissertation research.

My research study is seeking to explore the perspectives of inclusive educators (e.g., general education teachers, special education teachers) engaged in co-teaching and collaboration to increase understandings of how to strengthen, sustain and expand inclusive education for all students with disabilities. Implementing and sustaining inclusive education is one of the most complex and demanding reforms in schools today. Your participation is critical for the completion of the study and for assisting other teachers and schools to better understand how to improve and sustain successful inclusive education for all students with disabilities.

I am contacting you to see if you would be interested in sharing your experience of co-teaching and collaboration this past school year. I would like to invite you to participate in an individual interview lasting approximately 30 to 60 minutes and can be scheduled at a location, time, and date that is convenient for you. (Following the interview, I will provide you with the interview transcript to check for accuracy or to add additional comments if you wish.) In exchange for your participation, you will be given an opportunity to request a summary of the results when they are completed. Please know that all identifying information will be kept confidential and will only be accessed by me.

Please send an email to —— or call me at—— if you are interested in participating in this research project.

Thank you so much for your consideration, I would be most thankful for your time and for the opportunity to listen to your invaluable perspectives.

With appreciation,

Shirley Johnson
APPENDIX E
APPROVAL TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

The University of North Dakota
Consent to Participate in Research

TITLE: Inclusive Education: An Exploration of the Experiences of Middle School Teachers Participating in a Co-teaching Model
Shirley Johnson
701-385-3923
Teaching and Learning

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH
A person who is to participate in the research must give his or her informed consent to such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?
The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of inclusive educators (i.e., general education teachers, special education teachers) engaged in co-teaching and collaboration to help leaders support, improve and sustain inclusive education for students with disabilities. You are being asked to participate because of your experience co-teaching and collaborating in the middle school of this study. As a participant, you will be asked to interview twice with the researcher for approximately 30 to 60 minutes. If you are willing, the interview(s) will be taped for the purpose of review and transcription.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?
Approximately eight to ten inclusive educators engaged in co-teaching and collaboration in the middle school will be recruited to participate in the study. Participants will be recruited using purposeful sampling.

HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THIS STUDY?
Your participation in this study will include two individual interviews lasting approximately 30 to 60 minutes. The overall study will last no longer than 1 year.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?
You will answer asking questions related to your knowledge, skills, and dispositions towards co-teaching and collaborating as it relates to inclusive education.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?
There is a minimal risk of feeling discomfort when talking about working environment, colleagues or sharing dissatisfaction (if any). If you feel uncomfortable you may stop the interview or choose not to participate at any time. These risks are not viewed as being in excess of “minimal risk.” If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings about this study, you are encouraged to contact the IR department of the school.

Approval Date: MAR 31 2017
Expiration Date: MAR 30 2018
University of North Dakota IRB

Date:
Subject initials:
WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?
The benefit of this study will be bringing the voices of the inclusive educators (i.e., general education teachers, special education teachers) together in order to identify and understand key concepts needed to support, improve and sustain inclusive education.

ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY
The only alternative is not to participate in the study.

WILL IT COST ME ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?
You will not have any costs for being in this research study.

WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?
You will not be paid for participating in the study.

WHO IS FUNDING THE STUDY?
The University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified. Your study record may be reviewed by Government agencies, the UND Research Development and Compliance office, and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board.

Any information that is obtained in this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Any identifying information about you will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the principal investigator’s office. In addition, to make sure information is correct, you will be offered a summary of interview in order to check for accuracy. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of anonymous transcripts of all interviews. You have the right to review and edit all transcripts. Consent forms will be kept in a locked and secure location with only the primary researcher having access to the consent forms and personal data. After 3 years, all data will be destroyed. If there is a written report or article about this study, I will describe the study results in a summarized manner so that you cannot be identified.

IS THIS STUDY VOLUNTARY?
Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota.

Approval Date: MAR 31 2017
Expiration Date: MAR 30 2019
University of North Dakota IRB
CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS?
The researcher conducting this study is Shirley Johnson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact Shirley Johnson at 701-388-3885 or Dr. Kari Chiasson at 701-777-3236 (advisor).

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact The University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279 or UND.irb@research.UND.edu.

- You may also call this number about any problems, complaints, or concerns you have about this research study.
- You may also call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone who is independent of the research team.
- General information about being a research subject can be found by clicking “Information for Research Participants” on the web site: http://und.edu/research/resources/human-subjects/research-participants.cfm

I give consent to be audio recorded during this study.
Please initial:    Yes    No

I give consent for my quotes to be used in the research; however I will not be identified.
Please initial:    Yes    No

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subjects Name:________________________________________________________

_________________________________________    __________________________
Signature of Subject                        Date

I have discussed the above points with the subject or, where appropriate, with the subject’s legally authorized representative.

_________________________________________    __________________________
Signature of Person Who Obtained Consent    Date

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REFERENCES


Snyder, S. (2013). The simple, the complicated, and the complex: Educational reform through the lens of complexity theory. OECD Education Working Papers, (96), 0_1.


