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# You Have to Find That Music That Both Parties Can Dance To: One School District's Experience with Collaborative Conferencing

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Janel Marie Seeley entitled "You Have to Find That Music That Both Parties Can Dance To: One School District's Experience with Collaborative Conferencing." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Educational Psychology and Research.

John M. Peters, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

David Schumann, Mary Ziegler, John Lounsbury

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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**You Have To Find That Music That Both Parties Can Dance To:  
One School District's Experience with Collaborative Conferencing**

A Dissertation Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Janel Marie Seeley

August 2015

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## Dedication

*This dissertation is dedicated to all those who pursue that music that everyone can dance to.*

*Most collaborative partnerships arise out of adversarial situations in which divergent interests are entrenched in their own camps, focused on the differences that seemingly divide them. Each has its own worldview of who is “right” and “wrong,” the source of a problem, and what should be done about it. It is an “us vs them” milieu that is self-reinforcing. The incentives provided by traditional decision-making structures promote polarization and encourage groups to strategically emphasize the differences in their arguments. The expectations and roles demanded by this awkward, often hostile, dance are understood and adhered to by all involved, even if they understand that a different mode of interaction might be useful. Successful collaborative groups in our studies shut down this adversarial dance and helped transform those involved from self-proclaimed enemies to neighbors and eventually to collaborators. They transformed “them” to “us” and did so in a number of ways.*

(Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000)

*Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.*

- Helen Keller

## **Acknowledgements**

As with most major accomplishments, I could not have completed this journey without the tremendous support from family and friends.

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know. Music and wine, fireflies and moonshine, campfires and farm dinners, all nourished my heart and soul as I worked, or procrastinated, on this project.

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laughter and tears, but most importantly love. Thank you for all your patience and understanding. I'm looking forward to our future together!

## Abstract

In 2011, Tennessee passed the Professional Educators Collaborative Conferencing Act (PECCA), replacing the former mode of collective bargaining between professional educators and school board administrators with a process called collaborative conferencing (CC). The purpose of this study, the first research on the new process, was to investigate the experiences of participants who engaged in CC in one school district. The study also examined participants' perceived relationship between training and its application to CC. The school district used the newly developed Interest-Based Collaborative Problem Solving and Reflective Practice (IBCPS/RP) model to guide its CC process. This approach is similar to interest based bargaining (IBB), with one key difference being its use of reflective practice as means to communicate. Analysis of responses to phenomenological interviews with twelve participants revealed four themes that characterized their experience with CC: *power imbalance, climate, process, and schedule*. These themes related to the formal hierarchy among members, outside power influences, and trust issues. When asked to describe how they experienced their overall training and practice in CC, six themes emerged from participants' responses; *relationships, training quality, disconnects between training and application, influence of members not trained in the process, decisions made in the crush of time, and advantages and disadvantages of group size*. When all the themes were viewed as a set of experiences, the analysis revealed an overarching theme of *time*. Across the themes of *power imbalance, climate* and *process*, participants often referred to the time it took to go from initial feelings of frustration to a more positive experience. It took time for participants to develop trust, build relationships, and learn and utilize the RP process. Time was also a factor in relation

to the themes of *schedule* and the *eleventh hour*. These results, along with the related literature in the areas of both IBB and reflective practice, provide insight into the successes and challenges of CC using the IBCPS/RP model.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

When people work together, there is always the potential for conflict. To resolve conflict, workplace organizations may implement a variety of resolution strategies. One common method is to pit one side against the other; ultimately, one side will win while the other will lose. To avoid these adversarial win/lose outcomes, many public and private organizations are employing collaborative processes for problem solving. Such processes involve identifying mutual interests to minimize division and then finding ways to satisfy these shared interests (Fisher & Ury, 1981).

Public school districts are often a breeding ground for dissension and conflict (e.g., Houston 2001; Schwam, 2010; Smette, 2003; Williams & Garza, 2006). School districts in Tennessee are no exception. In 2011, the Tennessee General Assembly enacted “collaborative conferencing” to replace “collective bargaining” as a means to resolve disputes among professional educators and school boards (Gibbons, 2012). Since 2011, only a few school districts have attempted to integrate collaborative conferencing. This is in part because legislatively mandated training must precede collaborative conferencing, but no structure or finances were provided for that training. With this ambiguity, districts may vary widely regarding how and when training will occur and ultimately be applied. As a fairly new process, a district’s engagement in training and collaborative conferencing has not been formally evaluated or studied.

## Background

In Tennessee, school districts have used collective bargaining since 1978 to determine the terms and conditions of professional service by public school teachers and other professional educators. This was implemented with an assumption that negotiation was the most effective way to resolve conflict (Tennessee Department of Education, 2011; Gibbons, 2012).

The EPNA language described negotiation as

*The process whereby the chief executive of a board of education, or such representatives as it may designate, and representatives of a recognized professional employees' organization meet at reasonable times and confer, consult, discuss, exchange information, opinions and proposals in good faith, endeavor to reach an agreement on matters within the scope of discussions, and incorporate such agreements into a written agreement (Justia US Law, 2010, Part 6, 49-5-602).*

During collective bargaining when negotiating parties could not agree, a mediator could be requested to assist in the dispute through "interpretation, suggestion and advice." (Justia US Law, 2010, Part 6, 49-5-602)

This collective bargaining is similar to traditional negotiating and bargaining; participants begin the process with specific (and often oppositional) positions. For example, one position might be that teachers need additional leave. Teachers start by demanding three extra leave days per year. When the administration declares that additional leave is impossible, bargaining/negotiating begins. At the beginning, both sides may inflate their positions with an intention to bargain down to the smaller concessions

they actually want. To reach a final decision, often a professional negotiator speaks for each group. That representative can request information from the other group, facilitate offers or relay terms of agreement.

The structure of collective bargaining encourages participants to endorse one side's position and avoid contradicting team members (Barrett & O'Dowd, 2005). According to Fisher and Ury, while bargaining in this manner participants' egos can become involved as negotiators identify with their positions. This makes reconciliation less likely as participants try to "save face" and uphold their position (p 5). It creates a win/lose situation (Fisher & Ury, 1981).

During this type of bargaining, only the position is discussed. New and alternative ideas are rarely examined (Fisher & Ury, 1981). With that limitation, an action's consequences may not be considered fully. This can lead to unsustainable agreements and confrontational relationships. And again participants are trapped in a win/lose situation (Fisher & Ury, 1981).

To move beyond that win/lose dichotomy, Tennessee's governor signed the Professional Educators Collaborative Conferencing Act (PECCA) in 2011. Collaborative conferencing (CC) enables parties to reach a consensus-based, joint resolution to problems founded on mutual interests. As defined in the PECCA (2011):

*Collaborative conferencing means the process by which the chair of a board of education and the board's professional employees, or such representatives as either parties may designate, meet at reasonable times to confer, consult and discuss to exchange information, opinions and proposals on matters relating to the terms and conditions of*

*professional employee service, using the principles and techniques of interest-based collaborative problem solving.* (House Bill No. 130/Senate Bill No. 113, p. 3)

The key difference between negotiation and collaborative conferencing is the addition of *interest-based collaborative problem solving*. With these terms, collaborative conferencing is similar to other interest-based negotiation and problem solving processes involving collaboration. These are variously called Interest Based Negotiation (e.g., Fisher & Ury, 1981; United States Air Force [USAF], 2013), Interest-Based Problem Solving (e.g., Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service [FMCS], 2013; Gates, Lappe, Purdy & Rash, 1991), Interest Based Bargaining (e.g., Klingel, 2003; Montana Department of Labor and Industry, 2013; Travis, 2011), or consensus building (Innes, 2004).

This concept of interest-based bargaining, negotiating, or problem solving, was introduced as an alternative to traditional bargaining by Fisher and Ury (1981). Rather than emphasize winning and losing, interest-based bargaining (IBB) focuses on collaborative problem solving (Barrett & O'Dowd, 2005; Johnson, Donaldson, Munger, Papay & Qazilbash, 2009; Stepp, Sweeny, & Johnson, 1998; Sullivan, 2002). IBB's interactions are founded in participants' interests, which are their desires, needs and concerns for resolving a problem. Participants identify problems and then instead of working as separate teams, they work together to find the underlying interests that are common to all participants. See Table 1-1 as an example of a problem, interests specific to that problem, and overarching interests that apply to all problems.

*Table 1-1: Examples of problems, interests and overarching interests*

<b>Step</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Problem	How can the district improve fringe benefits?
Specific Interests	- Improve employee morale - Competitive with other districts
Overarching Interests	- Fiscally responsible - Are in the best interest of students

Regardless of the circumstances, collaborative conferencing is supposed to maximize joint decision-making while solving problems. To help ensure that participants are prepared for collaborative conferencing, PECCA mandates training for all involved parties. At the request of the Tennessee Legislature, a group of major stakeholders in Tennessee public school education met in the fall of 2011 and developed a comprehensive training plan to meet the legislative mandate. However, PECCA neglected to fund the training and the implementation of collaborative conferencing. This omission effectively shifts funding responsibilities to local school districts. It also left districts to interpret how the training plan is implemented.

In anticipation of local districts' demand for training and assistance with collaborative conferencing, the University of Tennessee's Teaching and Learning Center Institute for Reflective Practice (Tenn TLC/IRP) developed a comprehensive model of collaborative conferencing and related training, titled Interest-Based Collaborative Problem Solving and Reflective Practice Process (IBCPS/RP) (Peters, Schumann, Travis, Seeley, McKee & Bridgesmith, 2012). This model served as the framework for three-day training workshops designed to prepare local school district personnel for participation in

collaborative conferencing. The Tenn TLC/IRP was hired to train personnel from three school districts. One of the districts then asked two Tenn TLC/IRP principals to facilitate their collaborative conferencing with the IBCPS/RP process. The present study focuses on this school district.

### **Problem**

Except for largely anecdotal evidence gathered from related processes (e.g., interest-based bargaining) (Gates, Lappe, Purdy & Rash, 1991; Johnson, Donaldson, Munger, Papay & Qazilbash, 2009), little is known about how participants experience the collaborative conferencing process or how their initial training is applied during the collaborative conferencing event. This study addresses that knowledge gap by examining how participants experience collaborative conferencing using IBCPS/RP and related training.

### **Significance of Study**

School district-based contract negotiations have personal and professional implications for all involved. For school boards, administrators, other related public agencies, and taxpayers, the contract terms have major budgetary and policy ramifications. For educators, the outcomes affect not only their working conditions, but also their overall well-being. Arguably, how negotiations are conducted can help shape the school district's culture. Perceptions of fairness and opportunities to be heard could certainly impact subsequent working relationships between teachers and others. This suggests that the process of negotiating agreements is as critical as the agreement itself.

This study is the first to examine the process of collaborative conferencing. In addition to being of interest to public education's policy and decision makers and conflict

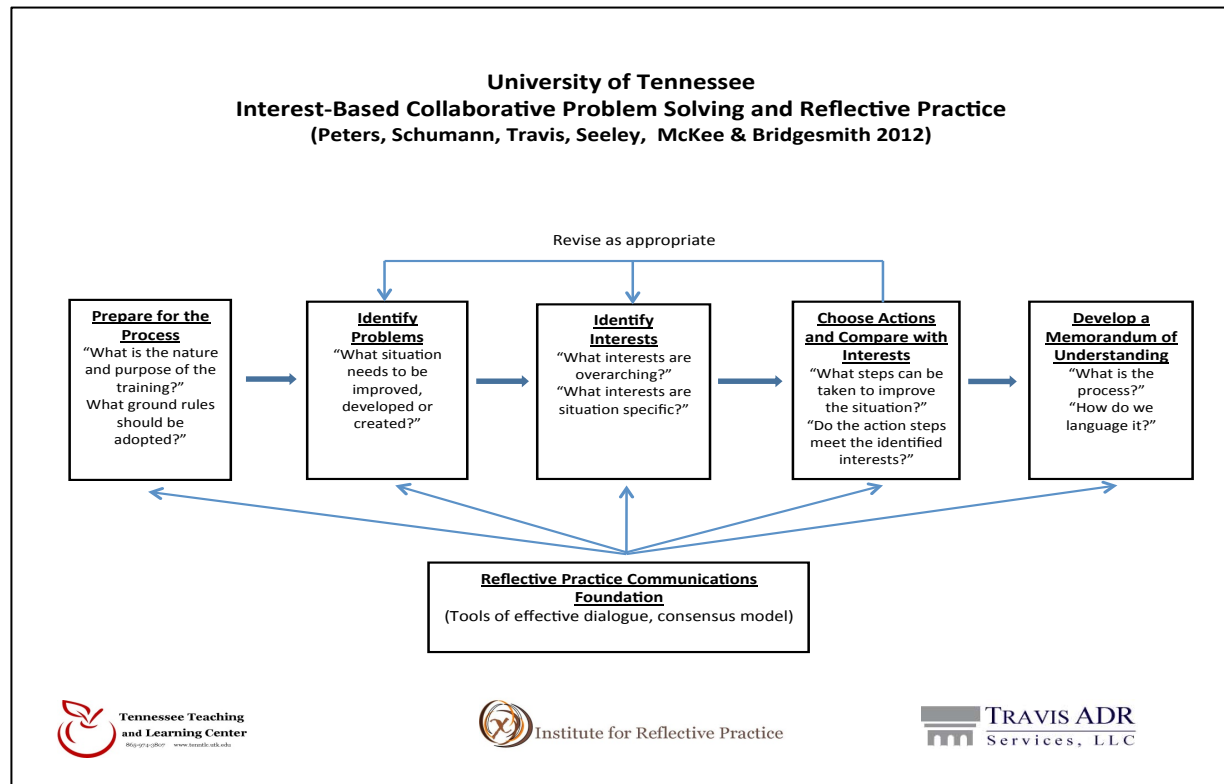
resolution specialists, the results of this study will contribute to the literature related to collaborative conferencing or similar approaches to bargaining in schools, businesses, and other organizations. The study will also contribute to the relatively small, but growing, literature on reflective practice (RP) by examining how reflective practice tools can be employed to enhance problem solving through the development and use of dialogical communication processes.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In line with consensus building and interest-based bargaining, the goal of the IBCPS/RP process is to encourage teamwork between both parties, to focus on common interests, and to develop consensus on a mutually satisfactory outcome. This is generally done through dialogue. The IBCPS/RP process incorporates the following five steps: 1) Preparing for the process 2) Identifying problems 3) Identifying interests related to the problems 4) Creating actions that relate to interests and 5) Developing a memorandum of understanding. Figure 1 below shows a graphic model of these interacting steps and the underlying RP process.

Step one sets the foundation for the remainder of the process; it includes two parts. The first is joint training for representatives from the district's professional educators and the school board. Unlike discussion and debate, dialogue does not always occur naturally--particularly in situations involving conflict (Isaacs, 1999; Yankelovich, 1999). This would seem especially problematic in the context of collaborative conferencing, where participants are faced with learning to negotiate in a manner that is much different from position-based bargaining, while also engaging in a largely unfamiliar way of

communicating with one another. This lends further importance to the role that training plays in preparing participants for successful collaborative conferencing.



*Figure 1-1: Interest-based Collaborative Problem Solving Model*

During this training, participants practice the remaining steps of the process. They may explore an issue that will become part of the actual CC event or an issue that is not permitted by PECCA. An issue that cannot be included allows practice without the accompanying pressure to reach a binding consensus. Embedded in that training, the second aspect of step one emerges. This entails identifying and establishing ground rules to follow during training and the entire CC process. For example, during the IBCPS/RP implementation that served as the focus of this study, members of each team were alternately seated next to one another rather than across from one another. All participants



could see one another as they spoke. No one had a “head of table” position. This physical setting helped minimize the “us versus them” climate and create a unified team climate.

Once the training is completed and ground rules are set, the participants can move to the second step. Step two involves answering the question, “What situation needs to be improved, developed or created?” The group identifies and defines those issues; then they are stated as a question. For example, “How can the district improve fringe benefits?” For this to be an effective, generative session, participants must remember they are generating an initial list of problems (not demands or outcomes). Other questions can always be added later during the IBCPS/RP process. Once participants agree on a jointly created, clearly delineated problem list, they continue to step three.

The third step is at the heart of the IBCPS/RP model; it involves identifying interests that are related to each problem. This step involves answering the question, “What interests are underlying this problem?” Participants define overarching interests as well as problem-specific interests. As shown in Table 1, a specific interest might be that the district would like to improve employee morale. An overarching interest, or ones that underlie all the problems, might be that any decisions made are fiscally responsible. Next, the entire team comes to a consensus on the list of interests. Consensus does not mean that everyone places the same emphasis on the all interests, but everyone agrees they are important. In addition, as in step two, other interests may always be added later during the IBCPS/RP process. This list is then used to inform step four.

In the fourth step, participants engage in dialogue to create actions that address the problem list. The focus is how to address the problems. For example, Table 1-2 shows potential actions that might solve the problems and address underlying interests.

Table 1-2: Examples of problems, interests and overarching interests with actions

<b>Examples</b>	
Problem	How can the district improve fringe benefits?
- Specific Interests	- Improve employee morale - Competitive with other districts
- Overarching Interests	- Fiscally responsible - Are in the best interest of students
- Actions	- Offer a family dental plan - Provide a choice of insurance plans

Once a list of actions is created, that list is compared to previously generated interests to ensure the interests have been met for each action. For example, does the action of providing family dental benefits meet the specific interest of improving morale? Does it meet the overarching interest of being fiscally responsible? An action that fails to meet all overarching interests may be modified, withdrawn, or placed on hold for further review. Once consensus is reached on the current actions, a representational subcommittee develops a draft of agreed upon actions. The group as a whole then reviews this agreement to ensure accuracy.

Working through these steps for each problem continues until all of the problems have been addressed. The final step involves writing a draft of the entire *Memorandum of Understanding* (MOU). This is developed by compiling all the previously approved agreements for each problem and making other agreed-upon changes to the MOU. The subcommittee of writers then presents the MOU to the entire team for consideration and modification before a final draft is sent to the school board for ratification. Upon board

approval, this MOU becomes a contractual agreement between professional educators and the school board.

A unique feature of the IBCPS/RP model enables teams of administrators and professional educators to engage in (RP) during the five-step process. The form of RP used in this model is based on the theories of several key thinkers who explored ways in which individuals examine their underlying beliefs and assumptions as a basis of action (Dewey, 1933; Argyris & Schön, 1974, 1978; Bohm, 1996; Peters, 1991; Schön, 1983; Mezirow, 1990; Isaacs, 1999). This form of RP involves reflecting together in dialogue. Dialogue encourages individuals to think together and make connections to what the group is saying as a whole. Rather than continuously stating and defending positions, dialogue is a way of making meaning together, "...a game we are not playing against each other, but with one another" (Bohm, 1996, p.7). Dialogue is a process of relationship building and a way of being. It takes particular skills of discourse that most have not honed (Yankelovich, 1999). These skills can be enhanced through the use of "tools" for developing the capacity of individuals and groups to engage in dialogue. These tools can help participants facilitate a climate of respect, trust, and transparency; focus on mutually satisfying solutions; as well as question and listen to identify their own and others' assumptions, beliefs, and values. These tools are discussed in more detail Chapter Two.

### **Research Questions**

To gain a rich description of participants' experience with the IBCPS/RP process during collaborative conferencing and related training, this study employs a phenomenological approach. The purpose of a phenomenological study is to search for fundamental structures that underlie an experience (Creswell, 2007; Bentz, Shapiro &

Jeremy, 1998). With the intention of examining these structures, the study focused on two research questions:

- 1) What are the experiences of participants in collaborative conferencing?
- 2) How do participants perceive the full experience of both conferencing and the training they received?

## **Chapter 2 Review of Literature**

Tennessee's PECCA law replaces collective bargaining with collaborative conferencing as the principal means of settling disputes. This study examines individuals' experiences with collaborative conferencing using Interest-Based Collaborative Problem Solving and Reflective Practice (IBCSP/RP) as a conceptual framework. Since PECCA is relatively new, there is no research on Collaborative Conferencing (CC) or IBCPS/RP. Therefore, in this chapter, I will review the literature on the use of interest-based bargaining (IBB), a closely related process to IBCPS/RP. Additionally, a key tool in facilitating the IBCPS/RP process is the use of reflective practice (RP). Therefore, this chapter will also provide a conceptual framework of the specific type of RP used and examine studies that relate to that framework. Finally, studies that relate to both RP and problem solving will be examined.

### **Interest-Based Bargaining**

According to PECCA, collaborative conferencing employs some of the same techniques used in IBB, namely, collaborative efforts. The use of IBB for problem solving in both business and government organizations is prevalent, as evidenced by numerous studies (e.g., Barrett & O'Dowd, 2005; Boniface & Rashmi, 2013; Cutcher-Gershenfeld, Kochan, & Wells, 2001; Davis & Rengert, 1995; Gates, Lappe, Purdy & Rash, 1991; Johnson, Donaldson, Munger, Papay & Qazilbash, 2009; Klingel, 2003; Miller, Farmer & Peters, 2010; Rubenstein and McCarthy, 2012; Stepp and Sweeny, 1998; Sullivan, 2002).

Interest-based bargaining has been a topic of debate since its inception. According to Cutcher-Gershenfeld et al., (2001), proponents believe it helps improve bargaining outcomes; opponents believe it limits bargaining power: "The essence of the debate

appears to be whether or not IBB can deliver ‘mutual gains’ across a full range of issues of interest to the practice in as complex an institution as collective bargaining” (p. 2) A review of the literature reveals several successful outcomes from IBB as well as a few challenges.

Cutcher-Gershenfeld et al. (2001) also analyzed data on interest-based bargaining (IBB) that were collected as part of the National Performance Review Survey conducted for the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. The data included 1,557 surveys completed by union and management representatives. They found that managers showed a favorable response to IBB with nearly 80% having a preference for this form of negotiation over other forms. Nearly sixty percent of union representatives showed a favorable response. When resolving non-wage related issues, the combined majority of respondents indicated a preference for IBB

Boniface and Rashmi (2013) examined current research to evaluate the success of IBB based on three criteria: efficiency, amicability and wisdom. These criteria are also goals of CC. They found IBB to be efficient primarily because it helps to create a manageable number of core issues for negotiation, allows for collaboration among large numbers of managers and employees, and results in contract agreements that are shorter than average in length. IBB was judged as amicable in that it helps negotiators to understand the other party’s interests and builds trust between management and labor. They also found IBB to be wise because agreements tend to be practical and valuable to negotiators and their constituents.

Trust has also been used to evaluate the success of IBB (Boniface & Rashmi, 2013; Johnson et al., 2009; Klingel, 2003; Miller et al., 2010; Sullivan, 2002). For example, in a study of negotiations between hotel management and an employees’ union in San

Francisco, Sullivan (2002) found that cooperation and trust, before and during bargaining, contributed to an increase in worker morale and a feeling of joint ownership in contract proposals.

Similarly, in a study related to the use of IBB in a public school setting, Johnson et al. (2009) interviewed 30 teachers' union representatives in six states and found that respectful and trusting relationships, especially between the union president and the school superintendent, were paramount to success of IBB. They found that although the relationships between the union president and superintendent were not always conflict free, they were respectful. Trust and respect contributed to an overall decrease in hostility and an increase in cooperation.

In a case study of national contract negotiations between Kaiser Permanente and the Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions, McKersie, Sharpe, Kochan, Eaton, Strauss, and Morgenstern (2008) also found that trust played a key role in negotiations. They found that working in smaller subcommittees prior to presenting ideas to the larger negotiating group allowed interest-based methods to be used to their fullest potential. These sub-groups were able to have open and honest communications, which helped develop a high degree of trust among members. This then helped prevent negotiations from breaking down once they began difficult discussions around salary.

Building trust and improving relationships by creating an environment in which each of the parties participating in IBB can feel safe sharing differing opinions can lead to brainstorming and developing more diverse ideas when problem solving (Davis & Rengert, 1995; Cutcher-Gershenfeld & Kochan, 2004). This trust is often built during pre-bargaining meetings and training (Boniface & Rashmi, 2013; Cutcher-Gershenfeld & Kochan, 2004;

McKersie et al., 2000; Rubenstein & McCarthy, 2012). For example, in a study of six school districts engaged in IBB, Rubenstein and McCarthy (2012) found that trust and relationship building were attributed to joint training prior to engaging in IBB. Similarly, in a study of Department of Health employees and management engaged in IBB in an Oregon county, Davis and Rengert (1995) found that training employees and administration together helped to set the tone and climate for collaboration.

Although training can help foster trust, developing trust can be a particular challenge during discussions about economic issues. For example, studies show that in discussions involving salaries, there is a tendency for trust to break down, especially between employers and unions, resulting in less satisfaction with collaborative efforts. When discussing economic issues, interactions often revert to more traditional bargaining techniques (Boniface & Rashmi, 2013; Cutcher-Gershenfeld et al., 2001; McKersie et al., 2000).

In a follow-up to their previously mentioned study on preferences for using IBB, Cutcher-Gershenfeld and Kochan (2004) reviewed data from a second national survey that was conducted for the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Services. They again found a generally favorable response to IBB although union respondents continued to rate IBB less favorably than management. This additional research also revealed that there were more benefit concessions on the part of unions when using interest-based methods than when more traditional methods such as collective bargaining were used. Cutcher-Gershenfeld and Kochan speculate this may be why union ratings of IBB are less favorable than those of management. Union negotiators appeared to fear that adapting collaborative problem-solving approaches, as opposed to strictly negotiating, would make them more vulnerable



to management power tactics (Cutcher-Gershenfeld & Kochan, 2004). Similarly, Miller et al. (2010) found that labor unions, specifically in the rail and airline industries felt as though they made more concessions than management when using this technique and were also less satisfied with IBB than management.

Through an examination of 19 cases in which traditional forms of bargaining were used and 19 cases in which IBB was used, Paquet, Gaetan and Bergeron (2000) found that when using IBB, more union concessions were in fact made. This was especially true during salary negotiations. However, they also found evidence of greater collaboration and more innovative agreements among those using IBB than with those using traditional methods.

Union members and others who are not at the bargaining table might be suspicious of the collaboration and trust that is developed between labor and management. They might perceive that in an effort to build collaborative relationships a position is given up too easily. (Boniface & Rashmi, 2013; Cutcher-Gershenfeld & Kochan, 2004; McKersie et al, 2008).

Klingel (2003) cautions that in IBB, "With the emphasis on improved relationships, the parties may rush into a level of personal trust that makes any failure in IBB a betrayal of the relationship." She goes on to say, "This may cause bargainers to hesitate to use power to leverage, even when it is the most effective way to advance their interest and reach a negotiated outcome on a highly conflictual issue." (p. 15)

Despite the continued debate about the potential benefits and downsides of IBB, in a review of trends affecting employment relations in K-12 public education, Clark (2001) predicted that the use of IBB would continue to expand. In 2010, Rubenstein and McCarthy concluded that collaborative efforts in education do in fact continue to provide an

opportunity for improving public education. In their review of six school districts engaged in collaborative planning and decision making, they found several key themes. Among these were a culture that promotes trust and integrity, a culture of inclusion, and an established respect for teachers as professionals. Management is typically seen as “as set of tasks that union leaders must engage in for the benefit of members and students, rather than a separate class of employees” (p. 5). In these districts, union and management see each other as colleagues with overlapping interests, rather than as adversaries.

In an effort to examine the experiences of those engaged in collaborative problem solving, Gates, Lappe, Purdy, and Rash (1991), all of whom are individuals with extensive experience in collaborative problem solving, published a dialogue among themselves on the topic of collaboration. These experts discussed issues of overcoming inequity in power among members of a problem-solving team. They discussed the need to build trust and the need to focus on the problem itself rather than on positions. They agreed that the collaborative process takes time since people are working together to develop communication abilities in order to listen to others, share ideas and come to a consensus. Gates et al. (1991) summed up the process of collaborative problem solving by saying,

*Ultimately, collaborative problem solving is about more of us getting involved in the process of creating a community: creating a sense of community among people, a sense of shared responsibility, shared destiny, networks of people who understand that they need to look after themselves, each other, their neighbors and their community. Without that notion of self-governance and taking responsibility both as individuals and as communities, we will see it breaking down and giving way to conflict and confrontation. (p. 112)*

These studies point to successful aspects of IBB and other problem solving efforts, along with some of their challenges. A further review of literature revealed additional articles on the use of IBB; however, the majority are primarily opinion-based and speculative rather than research based.

### **Conceptual Framework for Reflective Practice**

The concept of the reflective practice (RP) component of the IBCPS/RP model is grounded in seminal works that form the theoretical base for numerous studies of RP (e.g., Argyris & Schön, 1984; Bohm, 1996; Gergen, 2002; Isaacs, 1999; Mezirow, 1990; Schön, 1973). The particular interpretation of RP used in this study is based on seven aspects, as defined by Peters & Ragland (2009) and Peters & Schumann (2012). The seven aspects (in no particular order) are as follows:

***Climate Building*** --- Creating an environment in which there is a sense of safety and respect, supportive of a collaborative relationship among all participants. Climate building also involves developing a sense of trust among participants (Isaacs, 1999).

***Questioning*** --- Asking questions that help identify assumptions, clarify thoughts, and develop fair and balanced expectations. Questioning involves digging deeper into one's own and others' ways of thinking and developing a framework for understanding (Isaacs, 1999; Schein, 2013).

***Listening*** --- Skillful listening with the intention of understanding others' mental models, wants, assumptions, and values. Listening, with intent to be influenced by others (Brickey, 2001) helps ensure that all voices are heard (Gergen, 2002; Isaacs, 1999; Shotter, 1997).

***Focusing*** --- Seeing and hearing what others say and how they say it, moment to moment, individually and jointly. Focusing involves making connections among members of a

group, what members as a group are saying, and making meaning together based on the whole group's discourse (Bohm, 1996).

**Thinking** --- Identifying and suspending one's own frames, assumptions, values, and biases in order to understand one's own and others' viewpoints and behaviors. When engaged in thinking, participants examine underlying beliefs and assumptions that they may not have previously been aware of (Argyris and Schön, 1974, 1978; Bohm, 1996; Dewey, 1933; Mezirow, 1990; Peters, 1991; Schön, 1983).

**Acting** --- Taking next steps based on critical reflection of one's own and others' thoughts, feelings, and actions. Acting involves both reflecting in the moment (Schön, 1983) as well as after action taken, leading to future actions based on the creation of new meaning and understanding.

**Facilitating** --- Enabling conditions that create and sustain dialogue by participants. Facilitating is understood to include the potential of all members of a group to act as facilitators of dialogue (Bohm, 1996).

The following is a review of literature that most closely relates to the IBCPS/RP process and one or more of the aspects of RP without intending to be an exhaustive review of the literature relating to each aspect.

The interpretation of RP used in this study involves both "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action" (Schön, 1983). Reflection-on-action involves reviewing an action in hindsight in order to assess what might be done differently in the future. Reflection-in-action can be thought of as "thinking on one's feet," This involves generating a new understanding that informs one's actions in an unfolding situation. It requires looking into

experiences and identifying assumptions that exist in one's thinking of which he or she was not aware previously. As explained by Schön (1983):

*The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation. (p. 68)*

When involved in IBCPS/RP, individuals are encouraged to reflect both in and on action. This is done through dialogue with members of the group. Dialogue provides an environment in which individuals can connect and interact in a much more constructive manner than in traditional conversation, bargaining or debate (Bohm, 1996; Yankelovich, 1999). Isaacs (1993) defines dialogue as "a sustained collective inquiry into the process, assumptions and certainties that compose everyday experience [that may be understood as] the experience of the meaning embodied in a community of people" (p.25). To further define dialogue, it can be helpful to examine what dialogue is *not*:

*Dialogue is not discussion, a word that shares its root meaning with "percussion" and "concussion," both of which involve breaking things up. Nor is it debate. These forms of conversation contain an implicit tendency to point toward a goal, to hammer out an agreement, to try to solve a problem or have one's opinion prevail. It is also not a "salon", which is a kind of gathering that is both informal and most often characterized by an intention to entertain, exchange friendship, gossip and other information. Although the word "dialogue" has often been used in similar ways, its deeper, root meaning implies that it is not primarily interested in any of this. (Bohm, Factor &*

Garrett, 1991)

When in dialogue, asking questions is one way in which individuals and the group can reflect in and on action: “Instead of answers, we need good questions” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 148). Questions, particularly open-ended questions, can encourage deeper thinking on the part of the speaker and deeper understanding on the part of the questioner. Rather than immediately sharing a personal story or a solution to a problem, questions can help the questioner, as well as the speaker, to examine more closely what is being said (Isaacs, 1999; Schein, 2013).

Common forms of questions to avoid are *answers* that are disguised as questions (Isaacs, 1999), for example, “Why didn’t you try to do xyz?” This can put the responder in a position of defense rather than encourage reflection. In order to avoid this, questioners may ask themselves, “What assumptions or beliefs are embedded in the way this question is constructed?” (Brown, 2005, p. 93).

According to Brown’s definition, “Genuine questions- ones for which we don’t already have the answers- are open invitations to innovations” (Brown, 2005 p. 90). By openly and respectfully asking questions, the stage is set to reflect on assumptions and begin to solve problems (Isaacs, 2009; Schein, 2013). Additionally, as Horton (1998) posits, people listen more effectively to responses to a question they have asked. An unsolicited monologue or advice giving is often an opportunity for others to *stop* listening.

Key to the aspect of listening is ensuring everyone’s voice is heard (Gergen, 2002; Isaacs, 1999; Shotter, 1997). Shotter (1997) states, “If social realities are socially constructed, then it is important that we all have a voice in the process of their

construction, and have our voice taken seriously” (p. 6). Furthermore, Gergen (2002) explains:

*To affirm is essentially to ratify the significance of another’s utterance as a meaningful act. It is to locate something within an expression that is valuable, to which one can agree, or render support. To affirm another’s utterances is also to grant worth, honor and validity to the other’s subjectivity; failure to affirm places the identity of the utterer in question. Finally, in affirming an utterance one also generates the primitive bond from which further coordination may ensue. (p. 9)*

Affirming others’ input involves fully listening to them. “People don’t listen, they reload” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 18) describes a common practice discussion in which someone is not really listening, but instead thinking of what to say next. Listening involves being aware of the chatter that is going on in one’s own head and having the ability to push that aside in order to give full attention to the speaker (Isaacs, 1999).

Questioning and listening create cycles of reflection in which individuals learn from one another and the sharing of knowledge is respected and encouraged; thoughts and ideas are built together (Horton, 1998). There is a sense of contribution rather than simply participation, and a rich web of interactions is developed (Brown, 2005). Members of a group engaged in dialogue and reflection should see each other as teachers; all are part of a whole (Isaacs, 1999) and there is “a harmony of the individual and the collective in which the whole constantly moves towards coherence” (Bohm, 1999, p. 27). This involves building an atmosphere of trust. Setting ground rules, ensuring confidentiality and treating one another with respect, helps foster trust.

In contrast, Argyris and Schön (1978) posit that in common forms of communication

individuals often share guarded ideas and opinions. Individuals may have hidden agendas that they intend to advance. Not revealing a hidden agenda gives the feeling as though one can control situations (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Isaacs, 1999; Fisher and Ury, 1981). Additionally, with this mode of communication, the goal is usually to persuade others to one's own thinking or to point out flaws in the other's thinking (Argyris & Schön 1978; Isaacs, 1999). When hidden agendas are involved, individuals may perceive they are communicating, when really they are blocking open communication due to their need to defend their own ideas (Bohm, 1996).

In order to avoid this blocked communication, when engaged in RP, one is concerned with paying attention to what is being said and how and with connecting one person's thoughts to another by examining together what is being said. Making connections, stopping to ask questions and thinking together requires slowing down and taking time to reflect. It also involves examining what is *not* being said (Bohm, 1996; Brown, 2005; Isaacs, 1999).

This process of reflecting both in and on action, and fostering an atmosphere of trust through listening and questioning, can lead to a collaborative dialogue. This dialogue allows individuals to examine assumptions, explore others' points of view and often create new meaning and understanding together.

### **Related RP Studies**

When conducting an article search using the words "reflective practice," a large majority of articles found are in the field of education (e.g., Jones & Jones, 2013; Selmo & Orsenigo, 2014; Tannebaum, Hall & Deaton, 2014; Webster-Wright, 2013), social work



(e.g., Mishna & Bogo, 2007; Pack, 2014; Potting, Sniekers, Lammers & Reverda, 2010; Smojkis, 2014;) and healthcare (e.g., Disabato, 2011; Mitchell, 2007). Furthermore, a review of literature reveals that RP is defined in many different ways (Kottkamp, 1990, Moon 2004). For example, journaling and individual and group reflection are common forms of RP in which individuals reflect on past actions alone. However, in order to narrow the focus of this study, I have chosen to review studies that most closely resemble the conceptual framework for RP, as described above, and studies that examine RP and problem solving.

Several researchers examined the experiences of participants who engaged in graduate education coursework that focused on collaborative learning (CL) and RP (e.g., Alderton & Peters, 2002; Armstrong, 1999; Burress, 2013; Crosse, 2001; Dillivan, 2004). Most researchers conducted phenomenological interviews in order to understand how participants experienced the RP process. A common finding in all these studies was that the development of trust and respect was an essential component of students' experiences. Participants felt that trust was vitally important to the process of reflection. This is in congruence with the theory that trust enables dialogue and that dialogue in turn, can build trust (Gergen, 2002; Isaacs, 1999; Shotter, 1997).

Another theme in these studies was that students experienced frustration and discomfort in learning the process of RP, especially in the early stages of the courses. They described feeling as though there was no direction for them to follow and felt they were not accomplishing anything early in the experience (Armstrong, 1999). In some cases, participants felt incapable of engaging in the process (Alderton & Peters, 2002). Eventually however, through the passage of time, most participants became less frustrated and were

able to openly and jointly examine their assumptions and construct meaning together (Burrell, 2013; Crosse, 2001; Dillivan, 2004).

In a similar study, Roberts (2005) conducted phenomenological interviews in order to examine participants' experience with an RP course that was conducted both online and in face-to-face formats. Faculty and students in the US and Australia were enrolled in the course in which they read the works of leading authors of works in the area of social constructionist thought and then engaged with other participants and the authors in an asynchronous online dialogue about the authors' concepts and theories. Roberts identified five themes from participant interviews, documents, and observations that were similar to studies of the face-to-face courses studied by Alderton, Crosse, Armstrong, Dillivan, and Burrell. The themes from Robert's studies were 1) *establishing a comfortable environment* which involved overcoming discomfort with the learning environment, 2) *perceptions of other participants* which related to how members of the group saw one another and their participation in the course, 3) *participating in collaborative learning* described how participants experienced the four elements of collaborative learning, 4) *making sense of the experience* related to how participants related to the experience in a learning environment as well as in life in general, and 5) *learning outcomes* was derived from participant descriptions of learning content of the course as well as the process of CL.

These studies provide important themes when exploring how participants experience the process of learning RP. A consideration in relation to my study, however, is that participants in these studies were in a required, credited course in a graduate program. The primary objective of the course was to learn RP through dialogue, not to solve problems or reach a specific outcome other than learning the process of RP.

Other researchers of classroom-based RP have examined its role in students' focus on other subject matter topics. Gray (2008) studied students in a college English course in which she, as the instructor, used RP techniques to facilitate reflection. She used the concept of levelising (Peters and Ragland, 2009) as a framework for her study. Four levels of reflection characterize levelising. These include level I, pre-reflective being, in which one is unaware of one's own ways of thinking or perceiving thoughts or actions. Level II, or reflective being, involves becoming aware of one's own actions, often facilitated by a surprising or unexpected circumstance. In level III, or framing, one becomes aware of operating from a conceptual framework or worldview. In level IV, or theorizing, one begins to inquire into others' views and conceptual framework in order to choose or improve one's own practice. In RP, the intention is to encourage reflection in all four levels.

Using levelising to encourage and examine evidence of reflection, participants in Gray's English composition course jointly experienced the clarification of their thoughts, the generation of new ideas, reflection on actions, openness and comfort among one another, and the unique features of this type of pedagogy. Gray concluded that participants were able to construct narratives of themselves as writers and that participating in the RP process helped generate a community of practice in her classroom.

Merrill (2003), an office systems technology instructor in a community college, also studied the use of RP in an office systems technology course. She used Peters' (2002) framework of four elements of collaborative learning to examine her work. The elements are 1) dialogical space, 2) cycles of action and reflection, 3) focus on construction and 4) multiple ways of knowing.

Although they do not bear a one-to-one or singular relationship to the seven aspects of RP, these four elements of CL related to the aspects of RP in several ways. For example, dialogical space relates to *climate building* by creating an environment where members feel comfortable sharing ideas and are encouraged to do so through *listening* and *questioning*. Cycles of action and reflection relate to aspects of *focusing* on what is happening both individually and as a group and *acting* in the moment on those reflections. Focus on construction also involves *focusing* and *acting* by becoming aware of co-construction of knowledge or what the group is saying together. Multiple ways of knowing relates to the aspect of *thinking* by encouraging the understanding of various viewpoints and frameworks of individuals.

In her analysis of interviews, Merrill found evidence of the elements of collaborative learning. Her study revealed themes among her students' experiences that paralleled her own as a facilitator. These themes included *relationships* or the value of getting to know one another and learning about others' perspectives; *positioning*, or moving between the role of facilitator and participant; *dialogue and mindfulness*, or attending to everything going on within the dialogue (similar to the RP aspect of focusing). Her findings showed that RP was not necessarily beneficial to learning a specific structure of a computer program, but it was beneficial in learning to apply the concepts.

Other researchers examined the use of RP tools in their individual practices outside of higher education. Stulberg (2004), an attorney, used RP tools to develop her collaborative law practice. She conducted phenomenological research in which she asked her clients about their experience with her way of lawyering. Also using Peters' (2002) elements of collaborative learning as a framework to examine her work, she found that a

dialogical space that supported open storytelling from clients was present as evidenced by trust, respect and safety. Cycles of action and reflection occurred during these storytelling sessions by stopping and asking questions to think further about certain statements.

Knowledge was created between lawyer and client, and multiple ways of knowing were supported by openly discussing thoughts and ideas together with her clients and co-creating new knowledge: "Out of any conversation within the dialogical space will come knowledge that we could not have developed as individuals. The way of knowing that my clients and I developed is like knowledge built in a collaborative learning event." (p. 78)

The relationship built benefitted both lawyer and client by creating new knowledge and understanding of the cases. As Stulberg noted, however, it is not clear how these improved relations affected outcomes that eventually came before the court.

Similar to Stulberg, Duncan (2009), an executive coach, engaged clients in RP and examined the results of their coach/client relationship. He used levelising, as defined above, as a framework to examine his practice. He also engaged his clients in recognizing the process of RP through levelising. Through recording 4-6 one-hour sessions with each client, he found that using RP in one-on-one coaching sessions helped explore assumptions and frames of references held by both him and his clients. Duncan concluded that he was able to engage his clients in each of the levels. In particular, he found that while engaged in level three and four (framing and theorizing), participants were able to examine their own values, beliefs and assumptions as well as to investigate other frames of references and courses of action.

Similar to that of Stulberg, Duncan's study examined the evidence of CL in a one-on-one setting. Cotter (2001) also used RP tools in a one-on-one setting as a counselor for

college students entering a Student Support Service program. He examined his use of phenomenological questioning during intake interviews:

*By placing emphasis on coming up with “three things” that stood out and by taking on equal responsibility for that task, the relative positions of counselor and student changed. It was no longer me interviewing the participant, but two people working together to construct knowledge. We were better able to make use of the elements of good dialogue: we suspended thoughts and notions of authority, embraced polarization as a tool for seeing the concept, mediated each other, asked questions from a position of genuine not knowing, and granted each other the authority over our thoughts and feelings. (p. 91)*

Cotter’s study provides insight into the use of RP for problem solving. However, in his study, as with Duncan’s, participants were problem solving one-on-one for their own benefit rather than in collaboration with others in order to solve a mutual problem.

Using RP for problem solving in a group setting, Muth (2004), a forester, facilitated a dialogue between landowners and foresters to address issues related to land management decisions. Monthly speakers would share topics of interest with community partners, and two weeks later, Muth would follow up by facilitating a group dialogue to consider what the speaker had shared. The project was successful in that a group was developed in order to address community issues with other stakeholders as well. Her phenomenological research showed that participants were initially excited about the process. Unfortunately, participants later lamented that they did not get grant funding to further their project and no one stepped up as a leader, so participation dwindled. However, group members did

describe value and benefit to the meetings citing new opportunities for connecting with others and building relationships through meaningful dialogue.

Similar to Muth, Osborne (2003) used RP tools to facilitate a dialogue to solve problems related to a community issue. She facilitated the efforts of a group of community service leaders with a goal to work together to improve their community. Through reviewing audio recordings of four meetings of these community leaders as they examined ways to collaboratively work together, she found the following themes: 1) *communication and sharing*, which involved participants getting to know one another and sharing personal experiences, 2) *reflective thinking*, which involved challenging assumptions that were held by members of the group, 3) *forming collaborative relationships*, which involved the creation of a safe and collaborative environment, and 4) the development of all this takes *time*.

Fazio (2003) also studied a collaborative learning experience with a goal of problem solving. He used RP with a group of farmers learning about alternative agricultural practices. He found that the farmers appreciated sharing real-life examples with one another, creating new knowledge, and collaboratively learning from one another. However, he found that although individuals may have created new knowledge, there was little evidence of new group knowledge being created. Additionally, due to the comfortable dialogic space, he found that in this case, it was sometimes harder for participants to discuss conflicting issues. Because they were afraid of disrupting the comfortable space by bringing up conflicting issues. According to Isaacs (1999), addressing conflict is one of the features of dialogue. Fazio felt that the participants in his study appreciated the amicable learning space, so he was hesitant to further the dialogue by addressing issues of potential

conflict.

Creekmore (2011) conducted an autoethnographic study of his use of RP as a facilitator of a nine-week professional development workshop. He also analyzed his RP facilitation skills using the framework of levelising. He found that questioning was fundamental to reflection and that examining conceptual frames through questioning created a deeper reflection: “My ability to challenge my personal and professional frames and inquire into the frames of others was dependent on my ability and willingness to question” (p. 78).

Brickey (2001) conducted collaborative action research among a group of experiential learning facilitators. He and his colleagues examined how RP could improve their joint practices. Specifically, he and seven other participants engaged in action research to learn more about their role in facilitating training. By examining assumptions and reflecting on actions, all the facilitators changed their practice based on their inquiry:

*Since the end of the project, when something unusual or out of the ordinary arises, we treat the situation as a learning opportunity by enjoying the experience, reflecting on the situation, theorizing on results and assumptions, making informal plans and acting in the situation differently next time in order to observe what happens. (p. 90)*

Torres (2008) also examined the use of RP as a tool for improving practice among educational trainers and consultants. She examined her work in sharing RP via online dialogue over an 8-month period, with eight colleagues. Through analyzing interviews, her reflective journal and transcripts of online dialogue, she found that although frustrating, challenging and overwhelming at times, the RP process helped practitioners to examine



diverse perspectives that were beneficial to everyone. She concluded that RP created opportunities to discover multiple ways of knowing and to develop the capacity to step back from their frames in order to examine ways to work collaboratively together.

Gaskin (2007) examined an attempt by a behavioral health organization to shift from a quality assurance problem solving approach to a continuous quality improvement (CQI) approach. She examined her own and her colleagues' efforts over a six-month period of using Peters' and Ragland's (2009) model of levelising as a framework for CQI. She concluded that she was successful in facilitating dialogue and that slowing down the conversation helped participants to engage in critical thinking:

*The team reported that relationships improved when it asked questions, expressed sincere opinion, invited others to give feedback and experimented with new behaviors. In order to engage in this way, the team found it necessary to slow the process for individual and group reflection. This effort was not about slowing the conversational pace, but rather, adding something that resulted in the conversation's deceleration. Reflection made a difference. An individual or team may slow the process for reflection and engage in critical thinking on frames to uncover blind spots. (p. 70)*

Gaskin found that utilizing levelising contributed to improved group interaction among staff, which ultimately transferred to improved consumer care and continuous quality improvement.

Similar to Gaskin, Ragland (2005) studied the experience of 12 colleagues using RP in the workplace. Participants were educators in a school located in a correctional facility for juvenile offenders. She conducted a phenomenological interview with each participant

and found common themes in their experiences in the workplace. Nine of these colleagues then met to examine their experiences and to collaborate on ways to improve their work culture. Using Peters' (2002) framework of four elements of collaborative learning as described above in Table 1, to examine her work, she found evidence of each element of collaborative learning in their group experiences. More specifically, the group created a dialogical space particularly through sharing food and laughter. They created knowledge through sharing common experiences and inquiring into one another's practice. Multiple ways of knowing were observed through recognition of similar shared experiences and cycles of action, and reflection occurred through several group meetings in which participants reflected on their perceptions of practice and made sense of their shared experiences.

Tisue (1999) examined the influence of dialogue on decision-making in a family owned pharmaceutical business. She found five themes that described the influence of dialogue on decision-making: 1) *environment*, which involved creating a climate of safety, trust, and respect, 2) *listening*, 3) *learning* about each other and from practice, 4) *values* that included examining their differences, and 5) *practice*, or how to use dialogue. Over the course of nine months, there was a progression from no dialogue to dialogue as a way of being.

The above studies provide insights into how students and others experienced RP in various academic and practice-based environments. They also add to our understanding of how RP tools facilitate learning subject matter in formal coursework and various applications in the workplace and the development of group relationships. However, none

of the studies focused on the application of RP tools in situations involving resolution of conflicts such as might occur in interest-based bargaining

Searching for literature on other forms of RP using the words “reflective practice and interest-based bargaining,” or “RP and IBB” or “RP and negotiation” provided no results. Another search of reflective practice and problem solving and/or dialogue produced the following five studies.

The first study described using RP as a tool for problem solving when creating a selection protocol for an Olympic team (Roberts & Faull, 2014). This study involved both reflecting in and on action, as well as individual and joint reflection. The primary researcher used a six-stage problem-solving model that involved individual reflection, as well as reflection with another person. Similar to the aspect of thinking together, as it occurs in IBCPS/RP, the author began by reflecting jointly with the secondary author on the problem (how to select members for an Olympic women’s handball team). In this stage, they examined lessons learned from the past and policy to determine a focus. Next, the primary author individually reflected on objectives. This is similar to the IBCPC/RP stage of examining interests. While developing a final protocol or action steps, the authors jointly reviewed the plan for unexamined assumptions and refined the protocol further, prior to developing the final protocol. Roberts & Faull’s research provides the primary author’s account of the process in her role as consultant while using RP and adds to the literature on using RP with another as a tool for problem solving by reflecting on assumptions and past experiences.

In an action research study, Taylor (2001) examined the use of RP to address

dysfunctional relationships among nurses working together in a rural hospital in Australia. The researcher divided the project into three phases. During weeks 1-3, a group of nurses learned about RP and action research through reading articles and group discussions. During weeks 4-7, the nurses told stories about their experiences of issues with colleagues at work. They then helped each other reflect on their actions by questioning one another. In the final 8 weeks, the nurses worked together to identify common issues within their work units and came up with action plans to address those issues. Similar to the participants in my study, the nurses were using RP to solve problems as part of an action research project. This study contributes to the literature on using RP for problem solving by shedding light on participants' experiences with the problem solving process itself.

In a related study, Murrell (1998) examined the experience of nurses who were facilitating reflective groups in a nurse education program. She found five themes from the nurses' descriptions of the experience of facilitating: 1) *Characteristics of the process* determined that facilitators needed to be "real" people (i.e., not set themselves apart from the members of the group) who were comfortable with self-disclosure and were empathetic to participants. 2) *Characteristics of the group* included group dynamics that fostered feelings of safety and trust and supported active listening and willingness to share one's thinking. 3) *Facilitator support and development* related to the essential preparation for the role of facilitation. Training was necessary in order to avoid simply employing orchestrated techniques. 4) *Personal and professional development* involved promoting a climate in which exploring and examining experiences were valued as empowering future practice. 5) *Difficulties with the process* emerged from the acknowledgement that facilitation can be demanding, intense and sometimes uncomfortable. Inherent differences

of power between facilitator and student were also problematic at times. Among Murrell's conclusions were that facilitating a reflective process can sometimes be uncomfortable. This discomfort may be reduced by supervision and co-facilitation; however, co-facilitators or supervisors can observe non-verbal behaviors or hear an utterance that the other facilitator might have missed. This study provides insight into the role of a facilitator using RP in a group dialogue process.

Dalgic & Bakioglu (2013) studied how school principals from Denmark and Turkey used RP when making decisions. Their findings resulted in a framework for "Principals' levels of reflection and network of reflection" (p. 311). This framework includes three levels. First, *self-reflection*, which one engages in alone. Next is *one-to-one reflection*, which includes engaging with academic research, colleagues, mentors, coaches, and spouses. Finally, *group reflection*, which includes administrative teams, coaching groups, other sectors, networks, and school boards. Their findings showed that one-to-one and group reflection were most effective in fostering decision making. This study suggests that group reflection is beneficial in decision-making and problem-solving processes.

Cook-Sather (2015) interviewed participants in a student and faculty partnership program that was designed to encourage reflections on differences of position, perspective and identity. Students observed classes taught by their partner professor. This led to reflective dialogue, which created "deliberate consideration on differences in position, perspective, and identity that, in turn, generate ongoing critical reflection with the promise of changing higher education practices" (p. 5). Through these partnerships, diverse perspectives and assumptions were examined. With the underlying goal of being to "foster

a shift in institutional culture towards a more dialogic and collaborative approach to teaching and learning” (p. 6), Cook-Sather concluded that examining differences and perspectives among differences of position, perspective, and identity developed a “more informed perspective and deeper sense of capacity and responsibility” (p. 35) among all participants. This study shows that dialogue can be a tool for addressing differences and examining assumptions.

## **Summary**

This review of the literature has revealed successful outcomes and challenges of IBB in various settings. Successful outcomes of IBB include building positive and respectful relationships between traditionally adversarial groups. IBB also tends to create innovative and manageable outcomes and foster morale among employees. Studies do show, however, that administrators favor IBB slightly more than do employees. There also can be a level of mistrust from employees and their constituents that may stem from concerns of becoming vulnerable to management, particularly in regard to economic issues.

Several works cited in this literature review used IBB in settling workplace disputes or problem solving. However, the intent of IBCPS/RP is not to bargain or negotiate between two teams but rather to work collaboratively as a unified team to create mutually beneficial solutions to problems. The present study will add to the literature by examining IBCPC/RP, an approach similar to IBB, but which has not yet been studied.

This chapter also provided a conceptual framework that addresses the major aspects of the form of RP used in IBCPS/RP. A review of literature in which this type of RP has been used in other settings shows that RP tends to foster positive relationships and facilitate reflection. Through reflective dialogue with others, assumptions are examined

and new meaning often created. Building trust in this process sometimes takes time, however, and often individuals are frustrated when first learning to use the aspects of RP in dialogue. This study will add to this literature by examining RP's use in a new setting and by reviewing participants' experience using RP, specifically focused on a collaborative problem-solving situation.

The next chapter describes the research methodology utilized to examine the experiences of participants in a particular IBCPS/RP application.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Design and Procedures**

A phenomenological study searches for fundamental structures that underlie an experience (Creswell, 2007; Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). This research employed a phenomenological approach to gain a rich description of participants' experience with the IBCPS/RP process during collaborative conferencing and training. Those descriptions were examined for underlying structures with a focus on two research questions:

- 1) What are the experiences of participants in collaborative conferencing?
- 2) How do participants perceive the full experience of both conferencing and its training?

While the participants' descriptions do not provide conclusive evidence of a cause-effect relationship between the training and their subsequent experience in collaborative conferencing, such descriptions do provide insight into which features of training and collaborative conferencing had meaning for the participants. Understanding what stood out for participants can inform others involved in similar professional development activities, as well as those involved in theory building and research in collaborative conferencing and reflective practice.

#### **Research Participants**

Study participants were team members who represented professional educators (teachers) or the school board (administrators) in a collaborative conferencing event involving twenty-two people. Twelve volunteered to be interviewed. According to Thomas and Pollio (2002), six to twelve participants is an appropriate sample size for phenomenological research. For this study, all twelve volunteers were interviewed.



For clarity, interviewees were identified as teachers or administrators despite having worked together as a single team during the conferencing event. Of the twelve participants, seven represented the teachers association and five represented the administrators. The teaching representatives (labeled T1-T7) included elementary, middle and high school teachers and one librarian. The administrators (labeled A1-A5) included two administrators from central office, the superintendent of schools and two school principals. Table 3-1 describes the participants' occupation and gender.

*Table 3-1: Participant information*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Representing</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Gender</b>
T1 – T7	Teachers Association	(6) Teachers (1) Librarian	(5) Female (2) Male
A1-A5	School Board	(2) Central office administrators (1) Superintendent (2) School principals	(2) Female (3) Male

To maintain strict confidentiality, information that could identify individuals was not disclosed. This included using the gender neutral s/he. The only exception to this confidentiality is two direct quotes from the superintendent; both he permitted to be attributed to him.

### **Data Collection**

Prior to any data collection, I underwent what phenomenologists call a bracketing interview (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) with a University of Tennessee professor who was familiar with phenomenological interviewing. This interview helped me examine my beliefs, values, and assumptions as well as their potential influence on the research process. This helped me to refrain from guiding the interview or analyzing the data in a direction that reflected my own assumptions.

After completing the bracketing interview and receiving approval from the County Schools and the University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board (IRB), I conducted a phenomenological interview with each volunteer. Interviewees determined the interview time and location. Each interview was audio-recorded and took approximately one hour to complete. After completing the interview, participants received a \$25 Starbucks gift card for their time.

When I met with a participant for an interview, I conversed informally to help establish a relaxed environment. Then I followed a protocol recommended by Thomas and Pollio (2002). I asked an initial open-ended question to encourage an interviewee to share his or her experience in collaborative conferencing and the preceding training. I began every interview with the same question: "What was the collaborative conferencing experience like for you?" Subsequent probing questions were based on the interviewee's response to that opening question. For example, if a participant expressed surprise at the level of communication during the process, I asked them to "say more about that." I asked interview questions related to the conferencing process in the first part of the interview period. This inquiry addressed the first research question.

After the interviewee had responded to all probing questions and the overall interview question, I asked for confirmation that s/he was ready to proceed to the next part of the interview. At this point, I reminded participants of the three-day training program prior to the conferencing event. To focus on the training and the second research question, I then asked each participant another question: "What was the complete experience like for you, from training until now?" Again, I followed up with open-ended probing questions as needed. I continued to probe for responses to the second set of

questions until the interviewee indicated s/he had shared everything about the experience. This addressed the second research question. When the interview was over, I made field notes as suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2007). For example, I recorded my thoughts about a particular attitude evidenced by the interviewee or their verbal and nonverbal responses. I also noted how I felt during the interview, how I asked questions, the types of questions I asked, and other aspects of my role in the interview. These notes supplemented the interview transcripts and helped identify my biases as I analyzed the interview transcripts (Thomas and Pollio, 2002).

Additionally, I invited each participant to be interviewed a second time when the collaborative conferencing process was completed. Six participants agreed to another interview. In those interviews I asked, “now that conferencing is over, what else would you like to say about your experience from the beginning of training until now.” Each follow-up interview took approximately 15 minutes. I did not offer gift cards for these interviews, as they were very brief. I used the same analysis procedure I did with the first interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis was conducted using a procedure recommended by Thomas and Pollio (2002). First, I personally transcribed the interviews and then analyzed them for salient themes. This procedure involved reading each transcript multiple times for context, identifying key words and metaphors, developing descriptive codes, listing possible meaning units, and developing thematic descriptions of patterns in the meaning units. Once the analysis was completed, I contacted each study participant to share the themes in their individual transcripts. This helped ensure that my conclusions matched participants' experiences. If a participant offered a correction or additional description to his/her

thematic description, I made appropriate changes in the themes before continuing the overall thematic analysis.

This individual interview analysis was followed by reading across all the transcripts to identify recurring patterns or themes among the interviews that described “experiential patterns exhibited in diverse situations” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 37). These themes were synthesized and distilled into overall thematic descriptions. I then enlisted the help of colleagues, familiar with phenomenological research, to review transcripts and confirm an overall thematic structure for the data. Table 3-2 summarizes these analysis steps.

*Table 3-2: Steps in data analysis*

<b>Step</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Individual researcher task</b>	<b>Involvement of other researchers</b>	<b>Involvement of participants</b>
1	Read and re-read the transcript for parts that stand out as significant.	X		
2	Look for an individual’s patterns describing the experience.	X		
3	Examine commonalities or “experiential patterns” between all the transcripts and identify “global themes” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 37)	X		
4	Enlist other phenomenological researchers to review the thematic structure and ensure that the identified themes are logical and grounded in the data.	X	X	
5	Present findings to participants to ensure that themes have been identified according to their experiences. Conduct short follow-up interviews with willing interviewees. Repeat steps 1-5.	X		X

## Schedule

Because participants needed an extended time to solve three problems, there was a year delay from the time I submitted an IRB and began to collect data. A revised IRB was submitted and approved after that year. Table 3-3 is a timeframe of the study:

*Table 3-3: Study Timeframe*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Action</b>
May 2013	Research proposal approved by committee
June 2013	Proposal submitted to UT IRB and The County School District for approval
June 2014	Revised IRB submitted to UT with updated timeframe
July-August 2014	Conducted interviews
September-December 2014	Analyzed data and began writing
January 2015	Reviewed themes with participants and conducted follow up interviews
February-March 2015	Wrote/edited remaining chapters
April 2015	Submitted findings to committee to defend

## Ethical Considerations

This study presented no inherent risks to participants. However, to help ensure that volunteer participant risks were minimal, I undertook the following measures: (1) Participants signed an informed consent form before taking part in the study; (2) Anyone could refuse to participate or terminate participation at any point during the research

without any penalty; (3) The process of collaborative conferencing was discussed rather than the problems being resolved within the conferencing. Therefore, no potentially sensitive District problems could be revealed; (4) To protect participant confidentiality, all real names were replaced with pseudonyms for the review and for reporting findings; (5) Individuals involved in analyzing data were required to sign a confidentiality form; (6) Audio recordings and interview transcripts were securely stored in a locked cabinet at the researchers home (7) Immediately after their transcription, the audio recordings used as data sources were destroyed. All other data sources from volunteer participants such as schedules, reports or notes, were destroyed upon completion of the study.

### **Positioning**

According to Reason (1994), “critical subjectivity involves a self-reflexive attention to the ground on which one is standing” (p. 327). In short, through my experience as a facilitator of training and developer of the IBCPS/RP process, my thoughts and actions influence what I research. While the influence is not necessarily negative (Creswell, 1994), I still had to identify that influence. This imperative necessitated a bracketing interview to examine my assumptions that may have biased my research. This bracketing interview was conducted by a professor familiar with phenomenology. Some of the assumptions uncovered in this interview were:

- I believed that engaging in dialogue to solve conflicts can be more effective than brainstorming ideas or stating positions.
- I felt that the schedule developed by the district was not effective.
- I suspected the superintendent influenced the process.
- I believed that the participants appreciated the training and understood the benefit

of using RP.

On the other hand, my role as co-developer of the IBCPS/RP model and as a training facilitator could also be viewed as a strength. My familiarity with the process allowed me to understand what participants meant when using certain references or language. My position as an insider also helped me to ask further probing questions that a researcher unfamiliar with the process may not ask.

### **Trustworthiness of Data Analysis**

Once I conducted a review of the data, I sent individual participants the quotes and initial themes related to their experience that I intended to use as my findings. I asked participants to review their quotes and my categorization of their themes to ensure I had captured their words and intentions adequately. Most of the participants agreed with my analysis and only two asked me to make minor revisions. I combined these individual themes to derive overall themes of the CC experience. I chose not to share these overall themes with the entire group.

To further establish trustworthiness after thematic analysis, I asked other researchers familiar with qualitative analysis to review the strengths and weaknesses of my study (Creswell, 2005; Hatch 2002). Some of the questions addressed by the audit included the following:

- 1) Are the findings grounded in the data?
- 2) Are the inferences logical?
- 3) Are the themes/metaphors appropriate?

#### 4) What is the degree of researcher bias?

This audit helped me examine how I chose certain themes and metaphors as well as how I incorporated the actual words of the participants. I wanted to ensure that those themes emerged from the participants' lived experiences in the appropriate context. This review also encouraged me to examine how clearly I communicated my ideas and bolstered the study's overall rigor and trustworthiness.

#### **Limitations**

While the audit made these results more robust, the study still has limitations. First, this study addresses the experiences of participants in only one school district. Due to each school district's unique group dynamics, social structures and operational standards, experiences might not be generalizable to other districts. Second, a variety of procedural methods is being used for CC across TN. Thus, CC in other districts not using the IBCPS/RP will have experiences that differ from those using this process. Third, this particular district also used two of the developers of the IBCPC/RP process as facilitators for their collaborative conferencing sessions. That expertise could create a different experience from those engaged in CC with facilitators who are less familiar with the model. Finally, I helped develop the ICBPS/RP process and therefore have significant experience that could color the analysis despite the bracketing interview and the audit analysis.



## Chapter 4

### Findings

This study focused on how participants experienced a collaborative conferencing process under the new PECCA law in Tennessee. It was guided by two questions:

- 1) What are the experiences of participants in collaborative conferencing?
- 2) How do participants perceive the full experience of both collaborative conferencing and the training they received?

This chapter shares descriptive findings with illustrative excerpts from interviewees' descriptions. Chapter V will analyze those findings.

#### Research Question One

*What are the experiences of participants in collaborative conferencing?*

I began each interview asking the participant to “think back a year ago when we started collaborative conferencing. What was that experience like for you?” Those responses revealed four themes: 1) power imbalance, 2) climate, 3) process, and 4) schedule.

**Power Imbalance.** Power imbalance refers to the unequal positions of power held by individuals within the group as well as outside power and influences affecting the group. All perceived an imbalance. Many felt this imbalance negatively affected the process, while a few felt the imbalance was becoming more tolerable. These perceptions of power imbalance led to two sub-themes: *hierarchy* and *invisible influences*.

**Hierarchy.** In this instance, hierarchy refers the different titles and positions that were held by members of the CC team. Specifically, there were nametags that emphasized titles and the superintendent of schools was on the team. A5 recognized this imbalance

was, at least initially, difficult to put aside. S/he observed, “You know in a school system there’s always a hierarchy of power, you know in terms of- its teacher, its principal, its directors, superintendent, whoever is in charge of the school system kind of stuff. And I think it was really hard initially it to put the hierarchy aside.”

Two teachers felt threatened by this hierarchy. T6 explained, “With the hierarchy in the room, who will disagree when they have the power to fire you?” T7 stated, “A lot of people in the room have power to do different things, like fire me. It was intimidating at first with all the ‘bosses’.”

The nametags contributed to the perceived hierarchy. They were placed in front of each participant, but they did not use the same format. T7 explained that the nametags were not intentionally made to be unbalanced; separate people from each team submitted them. As a result, all the school board representatives had formal titles, whereas the teacher representatives included only first and last name. As T1 observed –

When you look around the room with the board team and you have Dr. Dr. Dr. and then when you look at our team it was just a first name. Which I’m not hung up on titles or whatever, but you know, nevertheless it can be a little intimidating when you look around and see so much Dr. in the room.

T7 thought that people felt offended by the nametags, “It’s totally the way they were submitted . . . theirs said Dr., Mrs., Ms. or Mr. and ours just had our names.”

Administrators also noticed. A1 commented, “I even noticed it in the nametags . . . our nametags are very formal – ‘Dr.’ – and the teachers’ are just first and last name. I think we should all be just first and last name.”

Despite this initial mis-step, the team eventually began to address one another less formally. A5 explained:

Since we've gotten to know each other, we've referred to one another by our first names. I think that that power issue isn't as great as it has been. I'm not sure you can ever make that go away... of course you can make it go away, maybe if you spend a couple of years together. You know, I think it's a time issue. (A5)

Although the team began to address one another by first name and became more comfortable with one another, another factor related to hierarchy was that in this particular district, the superintendent of schools served as a team member representing the school board. With this role in the district, the superintendent had power over everyone in the room. Many participants from both teams felt that his presence affected how everyone interacted. T6 described it this way:

To say having the head person (superintendent) in the room doesn't affect the conversation is just being naïve, because it's going to, even for the facilitators sometimes, in the beginning anyway. I just think the whole dynamic of this thing has changed solely because of him . . . I don't like to play the blame game or anything like that . . . But the times he wasn't at the session you could just see their whole team reacting differently and talking differently and then when he was in the room it was different.

The superintendent himself also noticed that his presence affected the way people interacted. He explained:

You know it's been a challenging thing for me just because of my role and you know there are a lot of times when a question will be raised or statement made and that

sort of everyone looks to me... what's my reaction, what's my answer... and I to try to say 'hey you know, look let's keep talking this through and not just do what I say.' It's what we come to consensus (on) as a the team and, you know, there are other perspectives around the table that might be supportive of this particular interest or have concerns about this particular interest that need be heard, and so it's been interesting for me to try to I guess manage that to some extent, but to some extent it can't be managed. But I try to not be the dominant voice at the table, even when people sometimes seem to want me to be.

A4 commented, "You know if the superintendent doesn't agree and is going to vote it down, there is no need to come to an agreement. He's not going to take it to the board." This notion often affected what was or was not said. Many of the teachers felt as though the administrators were not speaking or were simply following a party line. T6 observed that "when we did fist of five for consensus,<sup>1</sup> literally you saw heads in that room turn and look at him and then put their hand up...People would just say verbatim what he would say."

T5 observed that the other team "... seemed to be afraid to be open and honest with what they thought might work." A1 thought:

A lot of people who are also representing the school board may not want to say anything other than what they think he [the superintendent] wants to hear. And so,

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<sup>1</sup> During the initial training session, participants agreed to use the "fist of five" method for reaching consensus. When checking for consensus, participants hold up their hand using the following protocol:

- *Fist*: A no vote – I need to talk more on the proposal and require changes for it to pass.
- *1 Finger*: I still need to discuss certain issues and suggest changes that should be made.
- *2 Fingers*: I am more comfortable with the proposal but would like to discuss some minor issues.
- *3 Fingers*: I'm not in total agreement but feel comfortable to let this decision or a proposal pass without further discussion.
- *4 Fingers*: I think it's a good idea/decision and will work for it.
- *5 Fingers*: It's a great idea and I will be one of the leaders in implementing it.

he sets the tone, and so I don't know that we got, uh, I think there's some people perhaps on the school board's team that uh, I will never know exactly what they would've thought about issues. I think they're in a position that if they... well they serve at his pleasure. That tells you all you need to know right there.

AsT1 said, "People are more open to making decisions and discussing things when he is not in the room and there is less tension" (T3).

Likewise, T7 stated:

There's only one person in that room though who can fire everybody else. And I think that is the reason he shouldn't be there, because he has that kind of power . . .

The honest exchange of ideas is very different when he is there and when he is not. I think it changes as soon as he walks in. There have been times when he's had another meeting first and as soon as he walks in the door the dialogue is different...I feel like that the central office team and the teacher team, as a whole, as one team, don't really have very different views. I think we all really think the same things. But I feel like they are not allowed to think those things...I think we would have been done a long time ago if he had not been there.

S/he went on to say that s/he wished s/he could just directly ask some members of the administration team for their honest opinion, but ". . . they couldn't answer it anyway. So why ask something that I know they can't answer? There's no point in making them that uncomfortable."

A1 also shared an opinion about having the superintendent as a team member and how it affected what people said or did not say:

Anyone who has the presence of the superintendent, especially a superintendent that carries the power of 50,000 kids, 7,000 employees, you know, when he speaks people listen and he deserves that. I respect that position very much. So you have to be careful what you say pretty much in that situation.

T2 described the superintendent's presence as "the elephant in the room" and went on to say:

I don't know if it's fear, I don't know if it's intimidation, I don't know what. But I don't feel like everyone says all the things that they would like to say, I think it limits what people want to say. And the people on his team, I feel like they are more concerned with him being happy with them than our real business.

A4 confirmed these feelings by saying, "I think on our side we waited for the superintendent to speak, out of subordinancy."

T4 asserted that having the superintendent in the room "closed off discussion for members of his team. Because you know, if your boss is sitting at the table, there is a lot of things you don't want to say, or a position you may not want to take unless you've cleared it with him."

Again, the superintendent acknowledged this by saying, "It is challenging that everyone looks to me to see my reaction or my answer." If he could start the process again, he would probably work a little harder at not being the dominant voice at the table. He continued:

I've tried to work pretty hard to do that. I think at the beginning when asked a direct question I would answer it . . . but I think towards, more lately, I've tried to step back from it a little bit more to defer to others a little bit more explicitly. You know, ask

others to answer questions rather than doing it myself, just so that we can get more perspectives of the table. I think I would probably try to do that a little bit quicker, but I probably needed to experience that to learn.

Regardless of how the superintendent participated in the process, some participants believed the superintendent was essential to the team; they felt that as the person who works most closely with the school board, the superintendent needed to be there so he could present their views as accurately as possible. As T4 commented, "I know a lot of things that, some of the things that were accomplished would not have been able to be accomplished if he had not been sitting at the table . . . It may be even slower if he weren't at the table, because his team would have to go and check with him anyway and then come back with an answer."

Likewise, A1 noted that without the superintendent's support the process would be meaningless. S/he stated,

"You can't just arbitrarily sit around and say we can do this, without him being somewhere in the conversation. So if you're looking to make those kinds of decisions as a team, you look to the superintendent. He's kind of on board with this and I think that's hard. I can't imagine conferencing and him not being there. I don't know how far off we would go on making decisions, especially monetary decisions that he has to answer for to the board.

In summarizing the effect of the hierarchy in the room, T5 believed that "collaborative conferencing would have maybe worked better if the sides were more equal with power and authority." S/he also commented in despair that, "with power imbalance,

the process is doomed.” Despite that fatalism about the process, s/he also believes that how others choose to exercise the power determines the process’s success. S/he observed –

Some other systems have been able to reach agreement a lot more quickly and a lot more harmoniously than we have. So I don't think that the imbalance of power created by the statute necessarily prevents an efficient solution that provides common ground. I think it can, but I think it then kind of depends on the party with the most power and how much of that power that they want to exercise and how much they want to cede . . . . I'm still holding out hope.

Overall, the perceived hierarchy around titles and nametags seemed to dissipate once the participants became more familiar with one another. The superintendent realized the need to defer to other points of view, although the participants remained divided on his effect on the process. However, there were other influences that effected CC as well.

***Invisible influences.*** Several other influences that were not physically at the table created a power imbalance for the team. One is PECCA itself. The representatives on the team are not actually voting members of the school board. The board has the power to approve (or not) the memorandum of understanding developed by the team. Therefore, even if administrators and teacher representatives reach consensus, the board can legally vote down part or all of the MOU. The law states that the negotiations are conducted in good faith and puts power in the hands of the board. As T5 explained, “I remember it (the legislation) saying something like, ‘to the extent that any local school board wishes to negotiate in good faith with their teachers group.’ ... if a school board administration



chooses not to, they don't have to, and they can do whatever they want to." S/he also noted that the law now states an agreement does not necessarily have to be reached.

The big change in the law was that previously we had to reach an agreement and now we don't have to. Even if we do, the board gets to do whatever they want to. And that gives them, and I'm sure they are aware of this, a whole lot more options to do or not do whatever they want. And they are in no hurry, I think really the only thing that makes them want to have an agreement at all, I mean, if you think about it, if there was no agreement they can do whatever they want to and that's pretty good, except it's not good PR.

Another factor in relation to the school board was that some of the participants felt as if the voting members of the school board were really aware of what was happening. T5 reported, "We haven't divulged the process too much to, you know, to the school board, I don't know how much, they're getting as to how much is going on." T7 thought the board seemed oblivious about what was occurring with the collaborative conferencing. This was frustrating since the board made the final decision about implementing the MOU. S/he complained

So we'd like them (the school board) to be involved in what they're doing, because eventually they have to decide and vote on it. And not do whatever he (the superintendent) tells them to do. (They don't all have to be there) necessarily as a board, but we've had enough meetings that one of them could have come to every one of them and wouldn't have broken any of their open meeting laws. One of them could have come to everyone and seen the process and had seen what was going on. I don't think they have any clue about what's going on, they don't have any clue

what's being done . . . I mean it is their team; its supposedly put together by them.

They are charged by the board to do this, so I think the board should have some kind of, I think they should know what they're doing. (T7)

Those absent are not simply the school board. The County Commissioners, who must approve any budgetary implications, are also not engaged with CC. As T3 explained, “the Commissioners have the power when it comes to money issues and they are not even in the room...it's the governing body with the money that is the elephant in the room. And they are not part of negotiation, but they have the final say, or at least the money part.”

Yet another invisible influence on CC was the teachers association and the members who pay its dues. They were expecting their representatives to complete an MOU. Teachers might have been feeling the pressure from this group, as A3 explained, “To outsiders, it looks like we are not making a lot of progress.” A1 explained:

I think in any arbitration, the General Motors Ford or Chrysler, anybody that pays dues belongs to an organization or an association, sits at one side of the table and a management team sits at the other. And as they pay their dues, feel like they are due something. (They might say) ‘we are paying dues because we are protecting our jobs, we are protecting our benefits and we are protecting our rights. And one, we are not giving up anything, we are not giving back anything and we are also expecting something back’.

**Climate.** Climate is related to the RP aspect of climate building. Interviewee responses referred to the overall feeling in the room and how participants interacted with one another. Initially, several participants felt as though the climate was negative.

Eventually however, several participants described a shift towards a more positive climate. This shift is encapsulated by two sub-themes: *trust* and *opposing teams*.

**Trust.** Many participants mentioned that trust is essential for successful CC. They described trust as something that could only be built over time, and that “it takes time to get to know one another and build trust.”(A3) Many were left questioning whether trust had been built during this CC process.

In general, T6 felt that people would say things in private but were not comfortable saying them in front of everyone. T4 posited that this lack of trust was because –

There are a lot of elements that contribute to a lack of trust. One of the things probably is past practices, that’s the biggest thing. If a reputation has been built up on either side of not fulfilling past agreements in some form or fashion, or not living up to a promise that was made at the table, maybe a year ago or whatever, then there is that inability to say ok, we are starting over. People don’t have that ability to say ok, we are starting over, we know we made some mistakes in the past but we are going to start over from here.

In relation to mistrust, T2 described being happy to get a “win,” but then not trusting that it was made in good faith. “Trust is so important to this process and I don’t have complete trust . . . . We were excited to get the “win” on bereavement<sup>2</sup>, but then we were suspicious on why we got it . . . I knew that trust is so important to this whole process and I don’t have complete trust. There are certain people I trust, but not everyone.”

T4 summed this up by saying “nothing much can be accomplished because each individual or collectively as a group, both sides are saying ‘okay what is motivating this interest?’”

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<sup>2</sup> Bereavement leave was one of the issues addressed during this group’s collaborative conferencing sessions.

Several participants mentioned suspicions of ulterior motives from the “other side.” A5 thought, in the beginning especially, “somebody was trying to pull something over on somebody.” T6 suspected that the superintendent, in particular, had an ulterior motive and A2 felt as if the teachers did not trust the administrators. This was echoed by A4, who wondered if the teachers were always open-minded and if they were getting “outside advice” to hold a position. A2 was concerned that the teacher participants, as members of the teachers association, did not represent “the core or our workforce.”

One common perception was that the administrators did not trust the teachers. T4 noted that “it seems like they (the administrators) think we have some ulterior motive...They treat all of us as if we are dishonest even though it is a small majority (of teachers at large) who are not trustworthy. In that vein, T6 observed –

Sometimes I think the other team didn't trust what we were telling them about how teachers felt about an issue and so on...Sometimes I feel like they, that some of them only thought that this is only affecting you nine people. And they didn't see it as, you know, we hear from teachers, we being (the teachers association), so that was frustrating. But I think that goes back to the trust thing. And like I said, I'm not sure that is there even now, even though we've made some progress on things, I'm not sure there is the trust level that needs to be there.

On the other hand, a common perception from the teachers was that the administrators were purposefully stalling the process. Several teachers felt that the administrators were using this as “a delay tactic to run the clock out” (T5) and that “the other team were asking dumb questions over and over” as a way to stall (T6). T4 gave

others the benefit of the doubt by saying, “There was a lot of stalling, maybe it’s because they aren’t familiar with the process. T7 summarized this sense of stalling by saying:

It's just been very frustrating to feel that we're not accomplishing anything...I don't want to assume an agenda, but feels like a lot of questions asked were just for stalling... it felt like we keep hearing the same things week after week... and I know we don't want to assume that another person has an agenda, but I think there were many times when there were questions asked that just really obviously were for stalling or just stretching out our time.

To combat this stalling, the teachers met and developed tactics to prevent to CC from getting off track. T7 wanted to ensure that “when somebody tries to circumvent what we are supposed to be doing that we don't go with them. We just need to wait until the train has stopped... somebody (suggested that) and the rest of us are like ‘yes,’ because we all had done it at some point... So we said, ‘we need to just stick with what we are saying, we need to stay there.’” When asked what that strategy looked like, s/he explained that when she heard a question that she felt was a “circumventing question” s/he made an effort to not get “coaxed into a discussion” on it. “It was like . . . ‘okay there it is, I'm keeping my mouth shut, I'm keeping my mouth shut, and keeping my mouth shut!’”

T7 described this approach as working because when we're all really focused on not getting off-track that it was easier to bring everybody back....Once we said, out loud, that we weren't going to let them lead us off on a tangent, even if one of us went along, in the back of our minds, was a constant goal of staying on track. This made it easier to ‘let go’ of a tangent-inducing thought that we might have expressed, otherwise.

The lack of trust and suspicion of stalling was a source of frustration for many, particularly in the beginning. Eventually however, several participants, particularly the administrators, felt the climate changed and that trust was being built. A2 observed

It seems like there is greater trust among the group. We had some rocky bumps along the way as far as that goes too...We argue and, you know, we're like a little family, you know. We argue and present our perspectives and our points and, you know, try and find through that process, find consensus on where we can land. In doing so, you know, I do think you build a lot of trust and I think we're in a better place with the team.

A3 agreed stating "I think we built a level of trust in the conversation that is important to be able to make progress and to move forward...so I think there's a level of understanding of different perspectives that leads to a deeper level of trust and I think people start to then relax, you know." T3 also felt that people were becoming more comfortable with one another:

I'm disappointed that we're no further along. But the experience has been a good one. Not great not poor. I honestly think now that everybody's calmed down and we're actually talking to each other better that this will go on a lot faster. Don't you think at first we were really hesitant? People were careful and watched carefully what they said, and now people are just pretty much talking.

A3 attributed this increase in trust to time:

It seems to me that as a group over time we developed a higher level of trust than we had at the beginning. It was just in the beginning, we when we

started, it was more about somebody was trying to take advantage of somebody else. You know, what is someone going to pull over on me. And I just think over time we realized that that's not what people are doing, that everybody really is in it for the good of the school system...here lately we've been able to have more conversations that don't have to do that you know, referring to one another by first names, we didn't do that at first, but I think as we just come to know one another that we become more comfortable once again. And I think, I think there's a connection between the power relationships and trust. You know, how do you trust someone who technically is your supervisor, well then that is a different kind of trust.

It appears that building trust is an important factor in CC, especially when members of the team traditionally saw one another as opposing teams.

***Opposing Teams.*** Although collaborative conferencing participants represent two different groups, they are encouraged to act as one team for the best interest of the entire school district. Often however, participants described more of an “us vs them” type climate than two groups working together as one. T1 observed an obvious division within the team when training first began. “At the beginning of the training there were several people who were very specific about this is the board team and this is the (teachers association) team.”

A1 felt similarly noting that

...even though we are a team... the two sides had differences...meaning the management team had one understanding, the teachers group had another, and it was obvious. And the line was drawn... We still have philosophical differences based on, I think, our understanding of education, different

positions and background because that's where we are different. It always seems the teachers were wanting something and the management team was trying to give as little as possible.

A3 also explained that "we are still operating from an us-and-them ...Until we get down to the root of what it is that we believe in ...we are going to continue to approach it from two different perspectives."

A2 shared a desire to dispel the us-and-them mentality and to work more as a whole team:

I guess what always frustrates me the most in all of this is that the us-and-them mentality and I think whether it's collective bargaining or whether it's collaborative conferencing, we are still in that mindset...So you know we should all be working towards the same end game. Just because I'm an administrator doesn't mean that I'm on the other side. And I feel like, and I still feel that way, that we are still seen very much that way.

Some of the participants felt that there had been a shift towards working together as a whole team. As A4 described:

Overall I feel like the thought processes has worked as we have gotten through this where we ultimately ended up, I think, hopefully the team and I'm talking about the whole team, has learned through this process and has also gotten an understanding now...The bigger thing here is 'we'. That was what I, I really hoped we would get to the point where there was a lot more 'we' and I think there, I think we've arrived at that.



And A1 explained, “it's obvious when we start working together that we began to accomplish, I thought at the beginning we would never be able to come up with anything to be agreed upon. I think we have made movement towards the rest of the MOU.”

Many participants agreed that time is required to develop trust. And that trust is essential for opposing teams to become collaborators. A5 believed that collaboration had taken place because of the developing trust:

Here lately it's just felt like it was more like a group of people just trying to work together to help the problem and I think it's just that we have had the time to develop that trust. That can't happen overnight, especially with people who really sit on different sides of the table anyway. ...I think past history of contract negotiation was always all about literally sitting across the table from one another, passing a piece of paper written, you know, that kind of buying a car thing. And it really had an us-versus-them mentality. And I think initially, probably for the first six months, we were still in that mentality. I mean you could feel it in the room and so think we just had to get over that over time.

Trust appears to be a key to successful collaboration that takes time to develop. The perception of being one team, or two divided teams, may contribute to trust and the overall view of the process.

**Process.** Process examines the participants' experiences with how collaborative conferencing was conducted. Participants' experiences were mixed. Some described the process as frustrating or not efficient; others described it as beneficial and effective. From

those process descriptions, I identified four sub-themes: *bargaining comparisons*, *digging deep*, *slowing down* and *outside applications*.

***Bargaining Comparisons.*** Some, but not all, the CC participants had been involved in previous collective bargaining events. Many were unclear about how CC differed from interest based bargaining (IBB). Several participants believed that IBCPS/RP was simply IBB with a different name. T4 explained the similarity by stating

On the whole, the idea of collaborative bargaining, or interest-based bargaining or collaborative conferencing, whatever, I didn't find much difference in the process... even before we started collaborative conferencing as it's called now, we used the same type of techniques that we use in collaborative conferencing, starting out about 10 years ago when we switched over from the argumentative type of bargaining to what we call interest-based bargaining. So it was not completely strange work, the new venue for me.

T5 concurred that while the names were different, the goals remained similar. S/he recalled

from the training for reflective practice that we weren't bargaining anymore and collaborative conferencing was not collective bargaining. And so every time people reflexively began to use that word, it was, they were reminded that that was an old word and so I guess I'm still a little reluctant to use those words but the process is... the goal is similar, we are trying to reach an agreement and we are, if you want to call it bargaining, or whatever you want

to call it, but we are kind of doing the same thing with some different processes.

T1 blurred boundaries between the process by expressing frustration with IBCPS using language from negotiating and collective bargaining. S/he described that “everything we [teachers] bring to the table gets pushed aside” by the administration. “If what we brought doesn't work with the budget then okay, let's look at what they have and let's kind of bargain so to speak. Back and forth, negotiate with each other to something that we're agreeing on that's going to be beneficial for both parties.”

In several instances, participants identified interactions or tactics that sounded more like bargaining or negotiating than IBCPS. For example, at times there appeared to be presenting of positions. T1 recalled “writing a full MOU . . . present.” In addition, A4 observed that “what we got instead of actually sitting around and talking about why we needed this or what our interests for this are... instead what we get is a sheet that essentially is a position.”

Both administrators and teachers were perceived as bargainers rather than collaborators. T5 noted that “the perspective of the school board's representatives has pretty much been uh, ‘We are gonna hold out until you agree with what we want’ and that's not collaborative conferencing. I'm not sure what that is, but is not collaborative and it's really not conferencing, so . . . .” T3 acknowledged that the teachers presented one position more extremely than they needed to, an old negotiation tactic. “We threw it [a specific demand] in to see how far we could walk it down the road and from the old negotiation tactics we put in more than, you know, than you can get. Because you're going to have to give something up if you want it all to work . . . it's a tactic and I think it's used here too.”

Given the similarity to previous processes, T2 observed that those who had not participated in earlier bargaining sessions were at a disadvantage. S/he explained: “The people that don't know, haven't ever done any of this before, they don't have any background for how it looked before and aren't up on the terms we used. And I just want to say that's just another way to make things last long, you know what I mean. Let's not worry about the terminology, call it what you want to call it . . . .”

Some participants recognized that IBCPS/RP was not the same as IBB. T6 declared that IBCPS/RP was not as effective. S/he iterated, “I was on this team two or three years ago before the law changed and we had interest-based bargaining and the teams we had then, we rarely felt like we were butting heads. And I felt a lot of times this year; I felt more like this was not working like it was supposed to.” T2 and T6 blamed IBCPS inefficiency and ineffectiveness on the larger group sizes. T2 explained that “our groups before were maybe 4 or 5 people on each team at the most and we did collaborate . . . And I don't mean to mean to sound like a negative Nelly I just, because I am really sort of a Pollyanna sort of person. It's just it's just been so frustrating. I think partly it's been the great big group.” And T6 stated that “before there wasn't 18 people, there were 10 people. And it's a lot easier to corral 10 people or come to consensus than 18. So I think that's a drawback to this process, is how many were on each team. I think, I don't know that small is better, maybe 10-12 seems more of a reasonable number than 18.”

Other participants recognized that IBCPS/RP was not the same as IBB and believed a successful process required thinking and acting differently than before. T3 described negotiations as an adversarial process with the underlying communication “I want this, you want that, now what are we going to do?”

T4 contrasted that negotiating viewpoint with an IBCPS/RP perspective, stating  
You're starting out posturing with those things that you want to accomplish  
and both sides are posturing and we have to get past the posturing to find  
out, okay what are the interests. In collaborative conferencing you should  
start out from the beginning and believe that everyone sitting at the table has  
a common interest in the organization moving well, or operating well,  
benefiting the employer and employee when that happens.

A3 reflected on that change within the group.

Some of the folks around the table have worked with each other for a while  
and in some cases they were formally engaged in negotiations, and so they're  
used to a certain type of dialogue or interaction that is very different. I think  
first of all it may be frustrating to some because it doesn't look exactly the  
same as it used to, but it's not intended to. It doesn't look like it used to look  
like; it's a very different process... At its heart for me, as I understand it, and  
from training we had, its meant to be about a really collaborative, reflective  
interest-based dialogue. And that's different than sitting across the table and  
negotiating with people. It's meant to be a team working together toward a  
beneficial end.

A2 acknowledged that the change was slow. "I don't think that, that we fully started  
this process, you know, throwing out the old and embracing the new." But the change did  
occur.

The experience has changed over the past year. I think the first few sessions, and  
we've all articulated this, were challenging. I think that we were coming to the table

still with very different ideas about the process as well as about where we would start in the conversation and I think that those two things really impeded our progress initially. (A2)

Other administrators referenced this shift from the old process to the new process.

A4 observed that

I would like to have had, for it to have moved faster but you know, I think that there is a perception from some that we were already doing this. And I don't know that what was going on here before was necessarily interest-based. Interest-based bargaining, as they called it. But at that point as much, it was still just negotiations. So I think it's been, there's been a culture change, even for those that participated previously to what we have done here... Things aren't just railroaded through to have them completed, when that happens, when somebody does come with a piece of paper and puts it down, the process itself does, I will say, it prevents that from occurring. It doesn't even matter if it's the superintendent, it's not going to be railroaded through.

A5 was particularly pleased with the process in regards to bereavement leave. S/he noted

that was the best collaborative process, it was almost as if we finally got it. Because we really were working together, you know, we were. It wasn't, 'I'll give you this if you give me that; let's share, let's talk about it, let's use this word, let's don't use this word.' You know, we were all gathered around the computer typing and it was just, it just felt like a truly collaborative process and I think that's the first time. I think it just took us a little while to get there.

But not all participants were pleased with the changes in process. Unlike the previous process, IBCPS did not have caucusing, where each group retreats to separate corners to jointly decide on a position. T3 lamented:

You know they had talked to each other beforehand, but they had not come up with a game plan. They didn't know where they were going and we wasted time there. That first meeting where caucusing seemed to be a dirty word, I thought if you could just go in a room and talk to your people for a couple minutes, maybe you would have some place to start. I don't know what their problem with having a break between their team members was. Do they think the building was bugged?... (The superintendent) is not meeting with them and telling them, they're trying to figure it out. You know, they were definitely against any kind of caucusing from the very beginning. That irritated me because they wouldn't go out of their way to caucus for negotiations and that is exactly what it is. You've got two groups of people that have to come to some sort of consensus in the end. And it doesn't matter what you label it.

T1 was also frustrated by the lack of caucusing. S/he thought the process could have been more efficient with it.

If we had picked the topic, everybody went to their separate corners, got their information together and came back and actually knocked it out until we got... maybe not knocked it out... but you know, talked it out I guess would be better phrasing for that. Talked it out until we got to some sort of consensus or common

ground, we would have made it further in the process than we have at this point and we would have more agreed-upon language.

***Digging Deep.*** The IBCPS/RP process involves reflecting through dialogue. Some participants were confident that this reflective practice, or “digging deep” in the conversation, positively shaped the process. T5 explained that “instead of continuing to talk past each other [it’s allowing people] to try to find the basis of knowledge and understanding. And really only once you can kind of agree on or understand what peoples’ constructed realities are can you kind of do anything about it.” A3 even used the term “digging deep:”

Digging deep into interests and the rationale behind why things are of interest and why things are important and how we can meet the needs of representatives of teachers and schools...hopefully people are beginning to see it was all worth it, because we’re getting to a good place. Probably a better place now than where we would have been if we hadn’t gone through a lot of that early deliberative discussions....all of the conversations that we’ve had and all of the dialogue we’ve had, has been laying a very important foundation and framework for getting to some consensus and agreement.

Several participants thought reflective practice dialogue and digging deep was useful for helping to see things through different lenses and understanding other points of view. T1 said, “It’s always good to hear those perspectives and then to understand why.” A5 thought this understanding of other perspectives would benefit many more. S/he acknowledged that “trying to look at it through somebody else’s eyes and see how they are perceiving it is a very eye-opening experience. I think if more people were involved in it



they would have a much better understanding of what it takes to run a large school system.” T4 described this eye-opening experience as a simultaneous microscopic and telescopic viewing:

I think that's one of the biggest, greatest benefits of participating on the team is that you get the opportunity to view education with a telescopic lens and with a microscopic lens. Because you get to look at a broader picture of what needs to be accomplished, but at the same time you have to use that microscope in order to see the minute nuances that have to take place in order to accomplish work, in order to see that broader telescopic view. It doesn't just happen simply because you wanted to happen. You begin to understand why a particular department or supervisor or a particular department initiates a certain policy. Or why the superintendent asks the board to initiate a certain policy.

T5 found that after participating in IBCPS/RP (seeing telescopically and microscopically), general public discourse was frustratingly bound by partisan positions rather than problem solving.

the thing I like about it [reflective practice] the most is where people ask back. You know, ask, “why did you say that?” which is kind of what you're doing. I think that's great, because so much of public discourse is, and I need to stop paying too much attention to it because driving me crazy, but when people discuss issues, what they do is, they bring in their own constructed reality and so they talk past each other because they are not even talking about the same thing. And so reflective practice is an attempt to try to lock

people onto the same wavelength. To say, “okay now you just said this, why did you say that?”

T7 shared how s/he thought that process of asking back could be visualized, “I think it (dialogue) looks like everyone putting into the discussion and everyone taking out of the discussion, so it's exchange more than ‘here are our talking points and here are our talking points.’ I think there's more collaboration.”

And while some were satisfied with the amount of dialogue, A2 wanted even more of that collaboration. S/he reflected:

At times I felt really bad because I felt like the teachers that were at the table had very good intentions and, you know, really are trying to do the right thing. And I'll use that as an example in talking about salary, I felt like there was a complete disconnect and misunderstanding in terms of what the reality of our budget is. There needs to be opportunities to share information so that everybody has a common understanding.

That desire for more collaboration was balanced by participants who were frustrated with the use of RP. Some described the frustration as an initial part of the process that was ultimately overcome. A3 reviewed, “We've been uh, working with each other now for a while and, again, the nature of the conversation is such that it lends itself to really trying to understand each other. So again what can be frustrating at the beginning, I think is really important.” And T3 exhorted that “I think that you have to stick with something sometimes. You have to talk it through and get what it's all about and see it through different glasses.”

Others remained entrenched in that frustration. T5 complained that “spending a lot of time on discussions ended up really getting us no closer to any sort of agreement.” S/he was not alone in that sentiment. A4 questioned how useful RP could be if the participants remained tied to partisan perspectives rather than genuinely questioning to understand the other:

I think that the reflective listening is good as long as the part about really looking for the common interest in the shared interest is also taking place. So if it is just reflective listening, like we were doing in terms of salary for the first three or four months, that I don't see, that is not as beneficial if you have not really fleshed out the interests.

And T3 exemplified that lack when s/he described moments when s/he did not need to know why and only needed an answer:

Going back to asking why and trying to remember, and what questions to ask and how to probe deeper.... when I feel I know the answer, I don't need to keep, in my head I don't need to keep asking about it if they answered my question. I don't have to go around table 'why did you say that', because I already got the answer that I wanted...I think that everybody in this room wants everybody to be on the same page and that's not necessarily going to happen no matter how many times you ask back why.

Some participants described the asking back process as going in circles or getting off topic rather than solving a problem. T2 expressed frustration. S/he saw “digging deeper” as an indirect and inefficient approach

. . . Frustrating most of the time because I feel like we're doing a lot of talking around things. It's kind of like with the bereavement leave, let's find out what is going to cost, what we want to do, and then either you're going to give it to us or you're not. Why are we talking about it for six hours? You know, so many things that we talk around about, we don't just kind of go to the heart of what we need to do. You know I got that from my mother, I want to be brutally honest and let's get it out there and move on. You know, I can deal with that . . . . Just be very direct about, you know, this is, these are the issues. Let's talk about those and let's not just beat around the bush and talk about these things.

S/he also felt that there was a lot of "getting hung up on terms" which made things "painfully longer." Similarly, T7 observed that, "there is a cost of whether you really hear everything person has to say or whether you move. And there comes a time when you've heard enough."

Other participants contrasted a direct approach with what occurred in IBCPS/RP. Some noted that too much talk about feelings wasn't helping them reach their goals. T1 complained, "I don't have time to sit around and you know, 'how do you feel about that, what do you think.' If I want to do that I'll go to a therapy session or something. (Laugh) I'm kind of more cut and dry." And T5 concurred that asking back wasn't helpful or needed. S/he observed:

I think we had already laid out a lot of the, you know, why do you say this, what's your basis for stuff, and I think we were really ready to start talking about it... and then spent an hour and 20 minutes going around and having

everybody tell how we felt about it, and I thought we had already gone through all that. And it pretty much um, delayed. We spent a whole meeting on it and it didn't really get us any closer anything because people were still...But it wasn't the teachers who wanted to go around and ask everybody how they felt at that moment, because we wanted to try to get something done.

Some participants saw “asking back” as an obstruction to understanding and an invitation to “waste time” by exploring tangents. T5 mused:

I don't know if it's the problem with reflective practice or maybe just the way that it was being utilized...There were times when I thought we were just about to get somewhere and instead we headed in another direction and somebody takes off on a tangent. And it probably wasn't a tangent to them, you know, obviously they thought it was important that we hear that and so... But I don't know that I'm in a position to, to be the final arbiter of what is and what isn't relevant, but from my perspective that happened a few times. I don't know that I should expect it not to happen and as long as humans with different perspectives are going to be present then, uh, so... But, there were moments when I was thinking that, gosh we're so close, and now, and now are so much further.

T3 reflected T5's frustration explaining, “it takes an awful lot of patience; you can't take this stuff personally. You have to rise above it no matter what they're saying, even what your own team is saying sometimes. Sometimes you wish your own team wouldn't say something that they might say. You just have to keep moving along.”

T7 believed the facilitators were contributing to this problem of too much talking because they were more interested in the process than reaching an agreement.

It could come out sounding really offensive, but I don't mean it that way at all. I think it's the nature of... of our facilitators' background. They are very interested in... I think they are very interested in the thinking that's going on and studying the process and I think that that might cause things to go on longer because they are studying the people moving the process. And I think a facilitator with a different background may have pushed more to get the job done instead of to learn about the process and I think they're both very valid things. So I think that's, you know, that's what they needed to do. But I think that's, I feel like that's the reason that sometimes things went on longer, because I feel like they were interested in where it was going. And I think the rest of us felt like it is not going anywhere. I think they were interested in where that string would lead and the rest of us felt like that's just going to come back around in the circle....They really wanted to make sure everybody got to really say what they wanted to say, and even if it was something ridiculous, they were not comfortable stopping them. I feel like they were more interested in seeing where it was going to go then stopping them.

In general, participants were divided over the RP process of digging deep to get to underlying issues and ensuring everyone has a voice. Their frustration for sometimes related to the time the process takes.

***Slowing down.*** As mentioned in chapter two, the RP process (and digging deep) requires slowing down to examine issues and interests from all angles. T4 likened this examination to finding music that both parties can dance to.

To hear what people say, to begin to listen to what a person is saying, you know, and you begin to look at them as... you begin to look at yourself as part of a single entity rather than me against them or us against them. And I think that, with any kind of relationship, is built over time. When you have conversations and you can establish what is important to this person, now what's important to me, and where can we find music that we can dance to. (Laugh) And I think that is one of the good things that you have to do if the process is going to be successful; you have to find that music that both parties can dance to.

Many participants understood the necessity of slowing down to find that “common music.” A2 described the frustrating and time-consuming process of finding common ground as something that would ultimately “lead to a better outcome.” S/he professed that “I’m a firm believer and I know the work that we do here, it’s messy and sometimes you do have to swirl around in that mess (laugh) for a while until you can start finding some common ground to, you know, start building on.” T4 described that messy, “finding the music” period as essential for participants to “let down their guard.”

I became frustrated at not only myself, but those who had participated in interest-based bargaining became frustrated quicker because - been there done this--this is not hard people! Put your guards down, take off the gloves and we can get this done. But you know you have to convince people that they have to do that and so I guess it takes time and that oh you can try your patience!

A4 was amazed at how much time was needed to “do nothing,” but s/he acknowledged that “once we did pass that logjam, then I think we made progress.”

A3 also acknowledged the process’s messy, frustrating challenges, but like A2 and A4, s/he was optimistic that the group’s time investment would eventually yield good results. S/he reflected:

I think we’re doing it right and that takes time as we were trained that it would... I think, again, that if we are true to the process, I think that’s what we agreed to, that we would honor the process...and that's how we were taught, that it's going to take some time, it's going to take investment to get there.

While some participants believed this slowing down was necessary to succeed, others were less optimistic and more exasperated by the pace. T2 summarized, “I think if I had to pick one more adjective to summarize, it would be frustrating. Because of the time commitment, it's used up a lot of our lives and I feel like we should probably have more to show for it. All the time that we've invested...” T6 also attributed that frustration to “the (slow) pace, I thought we would have an MOU by now.”

Some participants believed the IBCPS/RP process could have been equally successful without requiring so much time. T1 explained that while “making an informed decision is a good idea... a timely decision is necessary.” This compulsion to spend less time may have emerged from the participants’ perceptions of themselves as “fixers” who readily completed tasks and moved forward. A1 speculated that “we are dealing with people, especially on the management team, who are fixers and it's hard because we just want to go in and fix it. That's our personality, let's just get this over with and move onto the next thing.” A4 further explained:



We are not like university folks and in this business there are so many things we have to, we are on such time crunches and you get it done. And being laid-back more I guess sometimes is difficult for us, because we know that we need this piece and it needs to happen now. And I think the salary piece kind of reflected that and this is our priority and we've got to have this and you make it happen. And so this process, it creates an environment where you're not going to do that.

And T1 envisioned how s/he would "fix" the process if it could be re-done.

I probably would be a little pushy about the agenda and staying on-topic and focused. I just really feel like that would've helped us to feel like we're moving forward. And everybody's busy, and we want to feel like we came away with something useful and accomplished and not, you know, months and months and years down the road and still we haven't accomplished anything.

On the other hand, A3 explained:

I also am aware of the process and it would be difficult to do this process as it was intended with fidelity in a period of two months like some districts did. I just don't see how you can responsibly do that. So again, I'm not trying to disparage anyone, I'm just, that's an observation.

Although participants were sometimes frustrated with the time it took to slow down and dig deeper, they also shared the benefits of the process, particularly that RP could be used beyond CC.

***Outside Applications.*** Several participants felt that some of the techniques, particularly RP, could be useful outside of CC. Teachers put it into practice in their classrooms and administrators used it in their workspace. T5 considered that the

application of those techniques might be even more valuable than the results of the collaborative conferencing. S/he explained:

I'm glad I've done it [IBCPS/RP]...it has been an educational experience... hopefully they [the participants] are thinking about that and how they can uh, help the whole educational process; help the students, help everybody... we may not reach any sort of agreement with the school board, but it can help out the students, which may ultimately be more effective anyway.

Some of the teachers certainly saw the value of integrating RP techniques in the classroom. T3 used it as “a new way of asking questions.” S/he elaborated that it was useful for helping students “think more about what it is they are saying or they're asking. It's kind of the thinking process, a way to think.” T5 also integrated RP techniques into the classroom. S/he explained:

I was already kind of doing some of the things that are associated with reflective practice in my classroom; I just didn't know that it was reflective practice. Some of the basic ideas, especially asking back, and having people actually listen to what other people are saying and respond to and ask questions. But now that I kind of understand the structure of that, I do that more in my classroom. Because, it, you know, the problems that reflective practice are designed to address don't occur just in discussions between teachers and school board, they occur between humans all the time.

The administrative participants also saw how the tools were useful in the workplace. A5 observed:

I'm really glad that I was involved in the process and it's making me think a lot about how I make decisions as (an administrator). Am I listening to everybody by looking at all the sides of the story? am I giving people an opportunity for input and those kinds of the things?...You know, how can I use it in a meeting? how am I asking back? how can I listen? you know, making sure that I'm really listening to people so that I can go back and say 'now what I heard you say, so let me make sure I understand this.' And so in using some of those skills, I found that it, I think it makes me a better leader.

While A5 focused on how to use those tools, A1 focused on when s/he could use them in “negotiating and that crisis management kind of thing, talking to people, diffusing situations, de-escalating... in conversations that we are having. And sitting around some of our leadership meetings.” S/he concluded that “a lot of skills were pretty good. I think I used some of them, but it was good for us to have some of those practices when we had to go out and use some of those things and do them as our homework. It was good practice.”

Overall, some participants found the process confusing and frustrating at times. However, several participants also felt that the process of slowing down and digging deep was beneficial in examining interests in order to solve problems. Participants also found the IBCPC/RP process could be useful in settings other than just CC. Although the process of slowing down involves time, another factor that contributed to some of the frustration of time was the schedule.

**Schedule.** Beyond the amount of time the process required, participants were frustrated with the gaps between sessions. Often, the meetings convened only once each month. A5 stated, “I know it's hard to get 25 people's calendars to sync, but sometimes it

just feels like it drags on when you meet once a month.” Several participants forgot what had been discussed at the previous meeting by the time they reconvened. A5 commented that “at least for the first three months, every time we met we were starting over again.” T4 insisted that “it should not take two years to get this done.” And T7 observed:

(The meetings were) spread out so far that sometimes that we couldn't remember what we talked about last time. Even the finance guys... There was one time when we'd asked the finance guys for some information and those guys, they are on top of things all the time, and they were like ‘oh we were supposed to do that?’ Because it's been weeks, and I've never seen them look like ‘oh we were supposed to do something.’

Multiple factors contributed to the erratic and inconsistent scheduling. As A5 mentioned, syncing 25 people's calendars can be challenging. But the lack of transparency about how the schedule was determined created distrust. T2 suspected that the meetings revolved around the administrators' calendars. “it also frosts my cookies that it's just them (the board team) that they act like they are busy and everyone else has got all this time.” Others believed the schedule was determined solely by the superintendent's calendar. T6 groused that “we've had to work around his [the superintendent's] schedule for meetings. And there's 18 of us, and I think I said this way early on, if somebody can't be there they can't be there. And it frustrates me that we schedule our meetings around his schedule.” T7 echoed that T6 stating:

The meeting dates pretty much all revolved around that one person again [the superintendent]... I think we could have met more often and earlier, we also would have accomplished more towards the end of the process if we hadn't revolved

around one calendar. And there were lots of dates that were changed for that calendar, but not for anybody else's calendar, and I think that people felt funny about that.

For some, the IBCPS/RP process was undermined by the inconsistency of meetings and speculation about why decisions were made. T3 stated:

The other thing that seems to bother me is we can't seem to set meetings and get to them. You know we've had to change meetings and change and change and change and then not have them for long periods of time and then two or three run on top of each other. There needs to be some consistency in them, in the way we do our business, as far as setting a schedule and sticking to it.

T1 elaborated:

Another thing that's been a little aggravating has been the scheduling. Like our very last meeting, they had asked us to do the doodle poll and I went back and checked the doodle poll and that last meeting that we scheduled was not even on the doodle poll, wasn't even an option. So we we're looking around wondering 'why is there no people here? They're already back on contract.' So our team felt like that was wasted time because our team was there.

## **Research Question Two**

*How do participants perceive the full experience of both conferencing and the training they received?*

I broached this question by asking participants to "Think back almost two years ago when we began the training in collaborative conferencing until now. What has that entire

experience been like for you?" Participants' responses yielded four themes: 1) relationships, 2) training quality, 3) disconnect, and 4) new members.

**Relationships.** Participants acknowledged that the training helped build relationships. T3 identified pre-training preconceptions that were diminished during training because of new relationships and a developing common understanding. T2 observed that "at some point [during training] I thought we finally jelled more as a group." T6 speculated that the success of the entire IBCPS/RP was built on the relationships established during training. "I think that we've done well considering the diversity of the group and a lot of people not knowing each other ahead of time. Maybe that was the result of the training before the actual conferencing that you all led us through, but we got to know each other better." Similarly, T1 also noticed improvement in group dynamics. S/he explained:

We got going on the process and you know we broke into small groups and it seemed like we were able to learn to work together a little bit more and reach a more of a common ground, to where it wasn't that we were different. I guess not necessarily different but less.

T2 doubted that the trust built during training was enough to sustain the CC process. S/he noted that "While we were training I thought we started off kind of a little tentatively with one another and then at some point I felt like we really gained some trust in one another that I hoped would go further than it did. You know but I don't think it did."

Participants expressed appreciations for the joint training with both the professional educators and school board representatives that helped to foster relationships

that carried forth throughout the process. Additionally, participants mentioned satisfaction with the quality of the training.

**Training Quality.** Several participants were eager to learn the IBCPS/RP process. A1 thought “the training was great, we can use it in a lot of different situations and we certainly can use it here.” A3 emphasized its value saying “we made a really sound decision to go to training; that helped work in a collective understanding of the process.” From that shared understanding, participants tried to “stay true to the process.” S/he elaborated:

...we've tried to be true to the reflective practice tenets that we learned in terms of really trying to understand where others in the conversation are coming from, to try to remember back and ask back, and to really listen to people. So, you know, I think people have been taking it very seriously and I think try to incorporate what we learned in the process into the collaborative conferencing itself.

Others also recognized value in the training. A1 mentioned the training homework (using the RP tools outside training and then reporting back), “it was good for us to have some of those practices when we had to go out and use some of those things and do them as our homework. It was good practice. And try to remember things in conversations that we are having.” T3 appreciated that training was conducted in large blocks of time, rather than being spread out over months. And A4 referenced the training as a model for the facilitated conversations they would later engage in. When asked what that sort of conversation would look like, s/he said;

I think like our training. Essentially how we were trained. Where we would really start from the beginning with that one. As we were doing early on, but we literally start from the point of defining the why, what are the real interests, because I think

there are some shared interests there. I think we need to find those...When you look at the training in the reflective listening and the understanding of... looking at the real interests, and find out that we share them, that is a really powerful tool.

But not all the participants valued the training. T5 focused on a limitation. The training “was promising as long as people were going to use it, you know.” And A2 observed that the training was not based in the participants’ interests. S/he felt that it wasn’t anchored enough in the common interests, but that it seemed as though it was more about using reflective practice to communicate.

Additionally, T7 was frustrated that during training they practiced on an issue that couldn’t legally be discussed in CC:

*So it's almost like that was meant to cause a problem. Because here are the things we can't discuss, but they are the only things we can discuss for training (T7).*

Initially, A2 felt that during training they weren’t always examining common interests:

*I hadn't thought about the training versus the actual process itself, and you know, and when I think back, you know, again to those early conversations in the fall, I think that there were several occasions people said, you know, 'where are we, you know, how have we strayed from the interests?' (A2).*

S/he didn’t feel that was happening for a while during CC but:

*I think we're doing a better job of circling back now and saying 'where does this fit in our interests' (A2).*

Upon further reflection however, s/he reconsidered:

*Actually, we were probably more anchored in our common interests (during training) than we have been this year in talking about the real issues... So in some ways I think it*



*was a stronger focus on the common interests (in training), now that I look back, than I think we've done in the real thing! (laugh) (A2).*

Despite the last sentiments, most of the participants felt the training was beneficial for learning the process. Unfortunately, once CC began however, there was an initial disconnect.

**Disconnect.** Due to scheduling conflicts, eleven months elapsed between the training and when CC began. Several participants believed this delay caused a disconnect between what they learned, the relationships they established and what happened during CC. T3 explained, “the gap was too long between the training and the actual work. “

Similarly, T6 noted:

we waited too long between, ‘okay this was our last training meeting and now we can have a meeting where we really start discussing issues,’... we came back and ‘yes we know these people but we haven't seen them, we haven't met in many months’ and I think that was a negative. That was a total negative. ...you don't need that lapse between the training and when you actually start conferencing. For one thing you forget the methods and things that you all taught us about asking back and things like that. I think people forgot that.

And A1 concurred:

I had a little bit of a disconnect when it was training and then it became reality... but I think, you know, we did all the training, we were ready to go, and then we couldn't seem to get started and it just made it seem to drag out. I think that also initially

hurt that level of trust, thinking that there was some perception that it was being done on purpose. It wasn't. It was just the way it happened.

Some participants said the process was difficult because the RP techniques hadn't been reinforced and practiced during the hiatus. T3 posited that the "down time didn't reinforce...we weren't putting into practice what we had learned." S/he elaborated:

You get better at it if you practice it. If you just tell me in theory and I do nothing with it, then in a short amount of time the theory is gone. So we didn't practice what we preached right away and whoever's fault it was, we should have been ready to go. That was the biggest thing about putting the two of them together.

And A5 agreed that using some of the RP techniques was awkward at first, but then it became more natural:

I think we understood the process at the beginning [of the CC], I don't think we understood how to use the process you know... It felt very artificial in the beginning like we were trying to read from a script or follow a playbook kind of thing and in actuality if it's truly collaborative we shouldn't be doing that. I mean that is not what makes it collaborative... (but now) We are beginning to understand how we need to speak to one another; you know how we need to ask questions. Even just understanding the concept of... we have to really communicate and all put 'how does this apply to me' aside and think about the greater good of the group. And I think just at the end of the last couple months we started to understand that part of the process. You know, we kind of have gone beyond the prescriptive 'do this and this do this.'

In general, the participants felt that the quality of training was good, but for some, it was challenging to transfer what they learned into practice. Another issue related to training was that new members of the team needed to be trained.

**New Members.** Some of the teachers were about to retire and others would be stepping down from their position on the team and new participants would be taking their place. Several participants expressed concern that these new people would not understand the process since they did not go through the same training. A1 explained that “it is unclear what training the new team members will receive.” A2 explained, “I guess I'm a little worried that the team composition is going to change somewhat significantly. I think that three or four people on the (teachers association) team will be transitioning off, so I don't know, that might be a little funny.” T3 echoed this saying:

I'm not so sure these people are going to be going to training in John's approach [RP] you know, because that's what we're using, they're going to need some training in that. I don't know if anybody's even thought about that yet because we have new members and we may have one or two that may need a little extra training, because they won't realize what the processes is. Especially if we are not all using it correctly (laugh) they won't know.

Beyond general concern, some were particularly interested in how the climate might change when those who had not gone through training join the group. T3 noted that “we've got several new people we will be dealing with and they have opinions. And they are not necessarily going to be civil, they're going to speak their mind and they don't care to argue with them.” And A4 shared that sentiment:

The new people coming on, you know some of the voices that I've heard, where they haven't had the trainings, it's concerning to me. I just hope that we are able to keep the same kind of collaborative spirit that we've had over several of those other issues, that they haven't shared in, they haven't seen those successes. So I hope we keep that really.

Participants recognized that the shared skills and awareness contributed to their CC climate. Their concern about retaining this within the personnel shifts reveals a desire to persist with the RP techniques they developed during training and throughout the process.

### **Follow-up Interview**

Three months after conducting the initial interviews for this study, the group completed the entire process and created an MOU that was approved by the school board. After sharing findings from initial interviews with the participants, I offered to conduct follow-up interviews with anyone who wanted to say more about the entire process after its completion. Four of the administrators and two teachers agreed to be interviewed again. In these follow-up interviews, I asked the question, "Think back from July until now that the entire collaborative conferencing process has been completed. What else would you like to say about your experience with this process?" The participants' responses provided two themes: 1) the eleventh hour and 2) group size.

**The Eleventh Hour.** This CC team had been selected to serve for a three-year term, which was about to end, so many of the participants felt a sense of urgency. T5 stated, "We had the sense that time was running out." A4 noted that "people knew we were bumping up against a hard deadline." As T2 explained, "You know, it came down to the eleventh hour. Literally, it did. I mean, the last meeting there was no possible... if it didn't happen then, it

was not going to happen because we were at the end of the agreement time that we had. You know, that three-year window.”

The sense of urgency appeared to result from several factors. Outside groups, such as constituents, the school board, and legal counsel, created a sense of pressure to produce an MOU. A1 and T5 felt this pressure because the membership on the school board was about to change and the new board might not be as favorable to the superintendent. A3 explained that legal counsel was suggesting that the MOU needed to be completed by the end of the three-year deadline.

Another factor was the length of time the teams spent on issues related to salary, the first issues they discussed. According to A1, the teachers’ representatives were getting advice that they should start with their top issue (salary), “and hang with it until you get an agreement on that. Because if you get that, everything else falls easily.” However, sticking with salary for the first year and a half left some participants, like A1, feeling it “just bogged us down, so I felt like we would be here until the end of time.” A5 explained, “Philosophically, that (salary) was where the biggest gulf was.”

Lastly, as the deadline approached, T4 observed that “all of a sudden (the superintendent knew time was running out and) was agreeable with all the things we wanted.” T5 described the last issue, relating to salary, as a game of chicken. He explained that “we had gotten to a point where we weren’t going to convince each other of anything. At that point it just came down to a last minute... I hate to call it a game of chicken, but it kind of was.”

There was a sense of urgency that affected the process in the end and the process appeared more akin to negotiations over positions on the last day. Prior to the last day

however, in an effort to continue collaboration efforts, sub-groups of representative from both sides were formed.

**Group size.** As mentioned in the initial interviews, many participants felt the size of the whole team (22 members) hindered the team's ability to accomplish anything. T4 noted, "the more people you have, the harder it is to get things done." In the last few months of CC tasks were assigned to smaller groups, to discuss issues, gather data and bring ideas to the larger group for discussion. A1 reported:

I think probably the last couple meetings, I think the worker bees, rather than the big facilitators, the little facilitators just took over.... You've got to have some (outside) discussions about issues that don't have all the information on the front end. (A few members from each side) sitting around a table with coffee and a doughnut or whatever can just have a much better conversation and be able to maybe say some things that they can't say or don't want to say in a wide-open public meeting. ... Then they can say, "we as a group make this recommendation" (to the entire team).

This chapter provided an overview of participants' descriptions of their experiences with CC. The next chapter discusses these descriptive findings in further detail and explores the implications for research and practice.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion and Implications

In this study, I sought to gain insight into the experience of individuals involved in a collaborative conferencing (CC) event that involved the use of the Interest-Based Collaborative Problem Solving and Reflective Practice (IBCPS/RP) model (Peters, Schumann, Travis, Seeley, McKee & Bridgesmith, 2012). In this chapter, I will summarize and then discuss the findings from chapter four. I will also discuss what the implications of this study for practitioners of collaborative conferencing or other uses of IBCPS/RP, as well as what future researchers may attend to when focusing on this line of research.

#### Summary of Findings

**Initial findings.** I derived four themes in reference to research question one: “*What are the experiences of participants in collaborative conferencing?*” The four themes are *power imbalance*, *climate*, *process*, and *schedule*. The first theme, *power imbalance*, led to two sub-themes, the *hierarchy* in the room and *invisible influences* which were derived from descriptions of others not in the room. The theme of *climate* in the room encompassed two sub-themes that included *trust* among team members, as well as the dichotomous perceptions of the existence of two *opposing teams* versus one united team. Four sub-themes were derived from theme *process*. Participants made *bargaining comparisons* to the new model of collaborative conferencing. Additionally, there are sub-themes of *digging deep* into the issues and *slowing down* to ensure the issues were being examined from all angles. The final sub-theme under *process* addresses how participants described *outside applications* of the IBCPS/RP model. A final theme that emerged from the data was the *schedule*. This addressed the length of time between training and conferencing, the length

of time between meetings, and the time gaps in the process that served as a source of frustration by many participants.

Four additional themes emerged in response to research question two: *How do participants perceive the full experience of both conferencing and the training they received?* The first theme, *relationships*, referred to participants' interactions with one another. The next theme, *training quality*, referred to participants' experiences in learning to use the IBCPS/RP model. *Disconnect* emerged as a theme, specifically in relation to the issue of the time lapse between the training and when collaborative conferencing started. Finally, the fact that some of the teachers were about to retire or were leaving for personal reasons revealed a theme of *new members* and how participants were concerned these new members may not be trained in the IBCPS/RP process.

As I was presenting my findings to the participants, the final Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) had been completed. Therefore, six of the participants offered additional information in brief follow-up interviews. These interviews revealed two additional themes. *The eleventh hour* emerged from participants' descriptions of being up against a deadline just before they finished the MOU. *Group size* referred to what several participants described as small groups of members meeting outside CC. These groups drafted preliminary language on certain issues that was then brought to the large group for editing and discussion. Participants saw this component of the process as contributing to successful completion of the IBCPS/RP process and the resultant MOU.

My examination of these themes and sub-themes revealed tensions that could be identified with each theme. The following is a detailed discussion of the themes and tensions that emerged from the themes in response to each research question.



**Research Question 1:** *What are the experiences of participants in collaborative conferencing?*

Table 5-1 shows the themes of power imbalance, climate, process and schedule, along with their corresponding sub-themes.

*Table 5-1: Themes, sub-themes under research question 1*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
Power Imbalance	- Hierarchy - Invisible Influences
Climate	- Trust - Opposing teams
Process	- Bargaining comparisons - Digging deep - Slowing down - Outside applications
Schedule	* No sub-theme

**Power Imbalance.** A key factor in successful collaboration is creating the sense that everyone has an equal voice and is encouraged to share his or her viewpoints, values, and ideas. If everyone had the same viewpoints, collaboration would not be necessary (London, St. George, & Wulff, 2009).

Three factors may have contributed to a sense of unequal voice for the CC participants. First, the administrative (board) team held decision-making power over matters important to the professional educators on the other team, and the latter perceived

a potential threat to their professional well-being if they were at odds with the administrators. Second, per the PECCA, the board had the last word in any case. And third, their representatives, although not actual members of the board, represented the ultimate decision making entity (the board), and thus the professional educators (teachers) perceived that they held an unfair advantage over them.

Additionally, the superintendent was one of the representatives of the board on the team in this district. The pros and cons of having the superintendent on the team were discussed on the first day of training, throughout the process, and again by interviewees. The superintendent reports directly to the board; therefore several participants assumed he was the primary voice of the board. However, some participants felt this made him a valuable team member, as they felt he could speak with authority to what the board would or would not approve. On the other hand, others felt that his position of power discouraged members from being completely open and honest, or led participants to simply defer to him for answers.

In addition to the school board, other outside influences appear to have affected the CC process. Teachers described feeling pressure from members of the teacher's association who pay dues in order to have representation, as well as teachers in general that they represented. The pressure from these groups to get an MOU, in what they deemed a timely manner, was felt by many of the participants. It seemed as though the teachers who were not at the table, and some who were, were viewing CC strictly as contract negotiations. These teachers also seemed to view the length of time it was taking as an indication that the school board representatives were "dragging their feet." According to Wondolleck and Yafee (2000), this mistrust of authority, and in particular government authority, is common

in collaborative efforts and can often hinder the process. The fact that these outside influences were not trained in the IBCPS/RP process may have contributed to the lack of understanding of the difference between CC and bargaining and that led to frustration with the time it took.

**Process.** When examining participants' experiences with the process, members of the group seemed to struggle at times with conceptualizing the difference between CC and bargaining. Some participants described CC as the same thing as bargaining, with some different processes. Participants often mentioned "giving in" to the other side or stating their positions, rather than creating new ways to solve problems.

Interest-based bargaining and collaborative conferencing do initially appear to be a similar process, as both attempt to examine underlying interests and reach consensus on ways in which to solve problems. However, the primary difference in IBB and CC is that the intention of IBB is to bargain for a contract and the intention of CC is to identify problems within the district and to collaboratively examine ways in which to solve problems for the benefit of the district as a whole.

How participants in this study perceived the process appeared to depend on the topic being discussed. For example, during the final meetings, when the group began to address salary again, the tone of the meetings was much more akin to bargaining than collaborating. According to the literature, it is common for collaboration around economic issues, or in the case of the primary issue dealt with by participants in this study, salary, to revert to more traditional bargaining techniques (Boniface & Rashmi, 2013; Cutcher-Gershenfeld, Kochan, & Wells, 2001; McKersie et al., 2008).

McKersie et al. (2008) also found that a shift to more traditional bargaining happened in the final weeks of negotiations although in general, the participants in this study described a more collaborative atmosphere as they progressed through the CC process. Similar to McKersie et al., pressure to complete the process and to meet a deadline appeared to lead to an atmosphere more akin to bargaining than collaboratively problem solving as the deadline approached. This atmosphere of bargaining was evidenced by comments such as “all of a sudden he (the superintendent) was agreeable to all the things we wanted (positions), it made me wonder what else we could have gotten” (T4). Or as T5 stated, “I said (to the superintendent) we are not going to agree to anything other than the continuation of salary.” A5 described feeling that in the end, the exploration of issues was “shortchanged” due to the time crunch in getting the MOU completed by the three-year deadline of re-electing new team members.

Again, when solving other problems, such as bereavement leave, participants in this study were able to discuss interests and then collaborate on creative ways in which to address this problem. This disparity between collaboration and bargaining might account for some of the frustration and confusion with the process. Although a study by Johnson et al. (2009) found that when attempting collaborative problem solving, among 30 teachers’ union presidents interviewed, many of them experienced a hybrid approach of combining both collaborative and traditional bargaining methods.

When beginning CC, participants were advised by the facilitators to prioritize the issues. They chose to address salary first. As they began discussions, it was clear that this issue was going to be challenging. Facilitators suggested moving to other topics temporarily that might be more easily resolved, but the participants reached consensus to

stay with salary. The administrators' team however, did not feel they had enough information on how to represent the board's view on salary issues and the teachers felt as though this was a tactic to stall and not reach any sort of agreement. It was clear that both teachers and administrators had the same interests when it came to salary; they were simply challenged on how to address these issues. They did eventually put the salary issue on hold and collaboratively address other issues more quickly.

Several participants also mentioned feeling frustrated that other districts had completed their CC process much more quickly. Two participants mentioned however, that they felt that perhaps the other districts had taken old contracts or MOUs and made minor changes without truly examining interests, digging deep, or examining assumptions.

Also different than other districts, the model of IBCPS/RP used in this study added an extra component of using RP tools as enablers of collaborative conferencing. Most participants in this study appreciated the use of the RP tools as a way to communicate during the process. However, initially, there was frustration about the time it was taking to hear everyone's voice and examine issues from various angles. According to Bohm (1996), in its early stages, it is common for dialogue to be frustrating. Both teachers and administrators mentioned that they were "doers" and were in the habit of resolving problems quickly; the slowing down of the process seemed tedious in the beginning.

On the other hand, several participants mentioned that they were also finding use for the RP tools in areas outside of CC. In addition to using RP as a way to problem solve during CC, a benefit to learning RP may be that interactions between principals and staff or between teachers and students might be improved.

**Climate.** The climate or atmosphere in the room is an important factor in collaboration and critical reflection. Fook and Askeland (2007) argue that establishing a congenial culture is just as important as using specific collaborative techniques.

In this study, there appeared to be a more relaxed and comfortable atmosphere, over time, as participants increasingly chose to address one another by first name and mingled with team members from both sides before and after the meetings and during breaks. Breaks included food, which also seemed to aid in creating a positive space, consistent with other studies that show food fosters an atmosphere of “warmth” and sharing (Osborne, 2002; Fazio, 2003; London, St. George & Wulff, 2009; Muth, 2004; Ragland, 2005).

This relaxed atmosphere and relationship building can foster a sense of trust. Trust is another key factor in successful collaboration (Brickey, 2001; Cotter, 2001; Fazio, 2004; Johnson et al., 2009; McKersie, et al.; Merrill, 2003; Muth, 2004; Osborne, 2003; Ragland, 2005; Roberts, 2005; Stulberg, 2004; Tisue, 1999; Torres, 2008). Trust is evident when there is a commitment to a non-threatening environment that supports confidentiality and non-judgment, minimizes risk and encourages new and different perspectives (Fook & Askeland, 2007). In this study, many participants described eventually feeling safe sharing opinions and did not hesitate to share opposing views in a respectful manner without fear of retribution. This sense of trust was described by many of the participants in this study.

On the other hand, there were a few participants who shared that they had partial trust, but were not completely trustful of everyone. This is also consistent with the literature that a strong familiarity with one’s opponent does not necessarily engender trust (Miller, Farmer, Miller & Peters, 2010).

**Schedule.** The schedule for this district's CC meetings was a source of frustration for many participants. Training was completed approximately ten months prior to the actual start of CC; once CC started, meetings were often held once per month, and the majority of meetings were scheduled for two hours at a time. When meetings were held so far apart, it took time for participants to recall what had been previously discussed and to get back on track. Similarly, Gaskin (2007) also found the lapse in time between meetings involving RP to be a hindrance to progressing efficiently because members had to be reminded of what was previously discussed. RP dialogue does not follow particular structure or outline and is influenced by what is happening in the moment. Therefore, it is difficult to re-create the context at a later point in time. Additionally, although in this district there were note takers representing each team, these individuals were asked to capture the problems and interests, rather than recording the dialogue verbatim. Additionally, there was not a formal dissemination of these notes, and there was no designated leader to which to assign tasks in between meetings. Also, since the meetings were most often held for only two hours, this limited the time for RP dialogue and may have hindered the ability to move forward more efficiently, due to the limited time to "dig deeper" and ensure all viewpoints were examined. This appeared to create a sense of having to start over when they ended the last meeting in the middle of a dialogue.

In addition to the time between meetings, several participants felt an unequal balance of power when the schedule revolved around only the time the superintendent could attend. They expressed frustration that any member other than the superintendent could be absent from a meeting, but meetings could not be held without the superintendent being present.

**Research Question Two:** *How do participants perceive the full experience of both collaborative conferencing and the training they received?*

When I asked this question, many of the participants continued to describe their experiences in terms of the actual collaborative conferencing, or only briefly touched on their experience with training. My intention was to avoid implying a connection that led to transfer of training. In hindsight, this question could have been more direct in order to specifically elicit their experience with training. Additionally, since training had been approximately two years prior to the time I conducted the interviews, there may have been a lapse in memory of the training experience. However, the following four additional themes did emerge from this question: 1) *Relationships*, 2) *Quality of training*, 3) *Disconnect*, and 4) *New members*.

**Relationships.** Similar to the theme of *climate*, as mentioned under research question one, *relationships* emerged as a theme from participants' descriptions of getting to know one another during training. This initially helped build the climate and began the process of developing trust and respect. Participants valued the opportunity to get to know one another, hear different opinions and understand others points of view. This value of relationship and climate building is consistent with the literature on the RP process that was the focus of this study (Burruss, 2013; Cotter, 2001; Osborne, 2003; Fazio, 2004; Muth, 2004; Ragland, 2005; Stulberg, 2004; Tissue, 1999; Torres, 2008) and particularly demonstrated by Crosse's (2001) spiral of interpersonal relationships in which RP leads to a sense of cohesion and community. Participants valued the relationships that were built during training and enjoyed getting to know the members of the team in a situation other than their official role as teacher or administrator. Seating members of each team



alternately side by side rather than across from one another may have helped in giving the sense of one unified team and allowed participants to get to know one another better.

**Training Quality.** Coleman and Lim (2001) found that there is a dearth of information on the evaluation of training and its relation to collaborative problem solving. They did find however, that at least 20 hours of training in collaborative negotiation has a significant impact on thoughts, attitudes and behaviors in the collaborative process.

Participants in this study mentioned that they were satisfied with their training, particularly that both teams were trained in the process together. Joint training seemed to help build relationships and create a mutual understanding of the process that was useful in preparing them for the process they employed in CC.

**Disconnect.** When participants discussed training, they often described an initial feeling of disconnection between what was learned in training and actual CC. This was primarily attributed to the time lapse between training and CC. The literature on transfer of training refers to this disconnection as relapse; if trainees do not immediately use the skills learned in training, they often revert to former modes of operation (Blume, Ford, Baldwin & Huang). Participants shared that over time, their disconnection eventually changed to understanding and they were able to use the tools learned in training with a little help from the facilitators. They described going from a feeling of “following a script” to feeling more natural when using tools such as asking back and making connections to what others were saying. This initial awkwardness is a common finding in other RP studies as well (Alderton & Peters, 2002; Armstrong, 1999; Burrell, 2013; Crosse, 2001; Dillivan, 2004; Roberts, 2005).

**New Members.** Also related to training, was concern over the fact that some members were leaving the team for various reasons, and new members were taking their place. It is not clear if these new members were trained in CC, and it was evident that they were not trained in IBCPC/RP in the same way as the original members.

**Follow-up question:** *What are additional experiences now that collaborative conferencing is complete?*

**The Eleventh Hour.** This theme refers to the experience many participants described as a pressure to meet a deadline. In this case, members of the CC team were elected to serve three-year terms. The end of this term was to occur three months after my initial interviews.

Near the end of their term, the professional educator representatives, (teachers) were feeling pressure from their constituents to produce an MOU that would be ratified by the school board for the next three years. According to one administrator, they were also getting legal counsel that it would be in their best interest to come to a consensus on the MOU. In addition to the term limit of the team members expiring, there was also the awareness that several members of the school board were up for re-election so there was fear that the “new” board might not be as sympathetic to the process and interests of this group and in particular the superintendent.

On the final day of CC, with no more meetings scheduled prior to the deadline, participants reached consensus on an MOU. Participants described the process on this day in terms that closely related to bargaining, particularly the former method of positional bargaining. In another case study of contract negotiations, McKersie et al. (2008) also described a shift to a heavy use of distributive (positional) bargaining in the last week of

negotiations. In the months leading to the deadline, however, participants in the current study described working in small collaborative groups that helped them to meet the deadline. This change relates to the next theme, *group size*.

**Group Size.** When discussing the use of RP dialogue in CC, several participants mentioned group size as a potential hindrance to progress and efficiency. Participants shared that prior to the last few meetings, they broke into sub- groups. As recommended in the literature (Stepp & Sweeny, 1998), having smaller sub-groups of representatives from both sides do some of the research and write potential language for the MOU, can assist with the process. This also allows for people who might be a little more hesitant to speak in the large group to have a voice in the process. The work of these smaller groups was then shared with the entire group for further discussion prior to coming to consensus. Participants felt this helped the collaboration process while getting things done, in what they deemed as a more efficient manner.

### **Overarching Findings Involving Tension and Insecurity**

The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data appear to reflect three tensions, some of which further reflect potential states of insecurity. These tensions include 1) *fear or intimidation vs collaboration*, 2) *process vs outcomes*, and 3) *time*. These tensions may have created insecurities and vice-versa. In this study, insecurity is defined as a state that is manifested in specific situations (e.g. fear of loss of job benefits), rather than a personal trait (Fridhandler, 1986), and is recognized by thought and behavior patterns (Hogan, 1977). Insecurity can lead to an emotional reactivity involving fear, caution, or hostility (Ross and Squires 2011; Wilkinson et al. 2013; Raina and Bhan 2013).

**Fear or Intimidation vs Collaboration** relates to the themes of *power imbalance*, *climate* and *eleventh hour*. Participants described hesitancy from some team members to voice opinions or share ideas when the superintendent was in the room. The fact that the superintendent was the only person with the power to fire anyone else in the room could have contributed to intimidation or fear from some members. Additionally, participants mentioned the perceived hierarchy in the room, particularly in relation to the titles on the nametags. This appeared to be particularly intimidating to the teachers initially.

Another factor that could have contributed to a sense of intimidation was pressure applied by outside groups, such as the legal council and teachers association, especially near the of the end of the process and the members' three-year terms on their teams. Participants may have felt intimidated by the possibility that they would be seen as ineffective by these groups if unsuccessful in achieving expected outcomes. Being perceived as ineffective could have led the participants to fear a loss of reputation or ability to effectively represent their constituents. This pressure from outside groups could also have caused the team to fear that other stakeholders might lose faith in the process.

These tensions of fear or intimidation might have affected the collaborative nature of the process. When individuals are afraid to share thoughts or are pressured to act in a certain manner, the process may look less like collaboration. This relates to the next tension of process vs outcomes.

**Process vs Outcomes** relates primarily to the themes of *process*, *climate* and *disconnect*. As previously mentioned, the process of IBB and CC initially look quite similar. However, the process of IBB is to negotiate for a contract and CC is to creatively solve problems. Although the intention of CC is to solve problems, the end result is an MOU,

which is, in essence, a contract. At times the process appeared to be a collaborative problem solving process while at other times, it resembled bargaining, sometimes even traditional bargaining.

When considering the climate in the room, the tension of process vs outcomes also appears, particularly in relation to the subtheme of teams. When the group considered itself as one united team, the process appeared to produce collaborative outcomes. In instances when they referred to themselves as separate teams, the process appeared to be more akin to bargaining and the process focused on one side "winning" a particular outcome.

Trust, as a subtheme under climate, also related to tension connected to process. Many participants described feeling a fear that the other team wasn't being completely honest or that they were excluding important information. Several teachers described a fear that the administrators were intentionally dragging their feet so that there would not be time to complete the process.

When referring to the training, many participants felt that it was useful for understanding the collaborative intention of the process. However, they described a disconnect between what they learned and how CC was sometimes conducted.

The tension in the theme of process refers to the collaborative process that can be compromised by insecurity stemming from pressure to produce specific outcomes resulting in an MOU. This tension, as well as the previous tension of fear or intimidation, also relates to the overarching theme of time.

**Time** appears throughout the themes of *power imbalance*, *climate*, *process*, and *schedule*. A tension is revealed as participants referred to the time it took to go from initial

feelings of frustration to a more positive experience. This is congruent with other studies that found that it takes time for individuals to master the process of RP, as it is not a familiar way to communicate (Alderton, 2000; Armstrong, 1999; Burrell, 2013; Crosse, 2000; Muth, 2004; Tissue, 1999; Roberts, 2005).

The initial perceived imbalance of power also eventually changed over time due in part to the use of more informal acknowledgments of others instead of by use of their formal titles. Participants began to feel as though they had more of an equal voice as time progressed. The superintendent recognized that there was a tendency for participants to look to him for answers, and over time he realized he should encourage others to share more of their own views.

Also over time, many participants felt that the climate fostered much more trust between team members. Participants grew more comfortable with one another and felt increasingly comfortable with sharing their opinions.

In the beginning, there was a tendency to try old techniques, such as stating positions and caucusing, which were similar to bargaining. Eventually, participants described a more collaborative process of problem solving on all issues except salary.

Initially, the act of slowing down the process felt like a waste of time to many. Eventually, however, many participants began to recognize a benefit to hearing many voices and perspectives on various issues.

Time was also a factor in relation to the theme of *schedule*. Participants felt as though there was too much time in between meetings, that the meetings only lasted two hours at a time, and that they were all scheduled on the superintendent's terms. The time

that lapsed between training and actual conferencing (one year) was also a primary factor in the feeling of disconnection that many members described when starting CC.

The themes from the follow-up interviews, *the eleventh hour* and *group size* both connect to time as well. *The eleventh hour* related to time in that many participants felt that they were under pressure to meet a deadline. By dividing into smaller teams of “worker bees” there was the feeling that time was saved by completing some initial work outside of the large group.

## **Conclusions**

This study was limited to one district’s experience of CC, specifically using the IBCPS/RP model to facilitate their process. Thus, no attempt is made to generalize to experiences of other districts. However, when the findings are coupled with the key theories and outcomes of other related studies, some conclusions can be drawn. With this in mind, I offer the following six conclusions and implications for consideration.

- 1) The perception of power is an important facet in collaborative conferencing. An imbalance of power can hinder what is being said and how.
- 2) Power imbalances can lead to a lack of trust among group members. The sense of collaboration is hindered when one or more people influence the process more often than others.
- 3) The imbalance of power can be addressed during training. Joint training with both parties together appears to be beneficial to building relationships. However, if there is a significant time lapse between training and beginning collaborative conferencing, participants may have to re-build relationships and re-learn information and techniques from training.

- 4) When new members join the team, they need to be trained in the same manner as the others on the team. In this case, those who were not trained in IBCPS/RP were at a disadvantage as they were not familiar with the process, especially with the RP aspects.
- 5) The use of RP as the vehicle for communication helps in distinguishing bargaining from CC, both philosophically and practically. RP creates an environment that promotes digging deeper into topics by examining issues from many viewpoints. This form of communication is not only useful in CC but has outside applications as well. However, RP does force the conversation to slow down. This can be frustrating for some, especially when CC is perceived as a form of bargaining and the goal is to simply reach an agreement as soon as possible. This is often the case with constituents and stakeholders who are not familiar with the process.
- 6) Pressure from outside constituents, particularly from those who the professional educators are representing, can influence the process. This is especially evident when economic issues are being discussed. As in other studies, salary continues to be a challenging issue and can test trusting relationships and the collaborative efforts of the team.
- 7) Building a climate in which potential tensions and insecurities can be reduced may lead to successful collaboration.

### **Implications for Practitioners**

Based on the findings of my study, the following implications are offered for consideration by future participants and facilitators of collaborative conferencing.



First, when considering fear or intimidation vs collaboration, hierarchy and power differences may be unavoidable when selecting conferencing members, although various steps may be taken to foster collaboration during CC. For example, avoiding labels that distinguish hierarchical positions may encourage a climate of trust and safety (McGraw Hill, 2000); particularly, creating nametags without official titles is one way to encourage the sense of a level playing field. Ensuring members that everyone has an equal voice and reminding those in positions of power to encourage input from others can avoid “subordinate power behavior,” (Allwood, 1980) which involves those in subordinate positions inhibiting their communication. By continually examining common interests, members are reminded to view themselves as members of one unified team, rather than as two sides bargaining over positions.

With respect to tensions related to process vs outcome, creating smaller work groups that meet outside of CC may help save time and encourage quiet members to share more. These groups can examine options, collect data and draft language that can then be brought back to the large group for discussion.

Additionally, it may be beneficial to choose smaller, easily solved problems to address first. This can give the sense of accomplishment and collaboration early on and build levels of trust and comfort. Saving salary or other economic issues for the end can help develop trust prior to discussing challenging issues.

Inviting constituents to be trained in or to observe the process in order to understand what is taking place in meetings may help them to understand the process and ease the pressure they place on the team. Training any new members in the process prior to participating will ensure everyone is operating from the same understanding of the

process. Additionally, continuing to re-train or remind participants of the process as they go along, particularly when there are large gaps of time in between meetings, may be necessary to avoid a lapse into former modes of negotiations.

Finally, when considering time, it is necessary to remember that building trust may also take time and that participants need to feel safe before they are comfortable sharing some of their thoughts and opinions. This may particularly be an issue with parties who formerly opposed one another in traditional bargaining. Participants may also need reminders that examining interests, hearing various points of view, and examining assumptions will take time.

Additionally, all participants should have a voice in creating the schedule. This helps to foster a climate of collaboration and allows for as many participants to be present as possible. Additionally, scheduling conferencing to begin as soon as possible after training will help to avoid the disconnect participants in this study felt when they waited nearly a year before beginning CC. Also, scheduling meetings as closely together as possible and for as long as possible may help avoid disconnects in the form of memory lapses and loss of skill experienced by participants in the current study. Note takers who distribute notes prior to meetings and create a list of actions that need to be addressed in between meetings can help keep the team on track.

### **Implications for future research**

This study is the first research on collaborative conferencing, as mandated and practiced in Tennessee. Therefore, it would be useful to examine experiences of other collaborative conferencing efforts in other school districts and perhaps similar processes in

other states. Since this study explored CC using the IBCPS/RP model, researchers may replicate this study by examining other school districts using this specific form of CC.

As CC is closely related to IBB, another question that remains is the difference of participants' experiences between IBB and CC. There is also a lack of research on the effects of training and IBB, CC or IBCPS/RP. For those wishing to further the research on RP, it would be particularly interesting to examine the difference in IBB and other CC efforts in relation to the type of communication used in comparison to RP. Additionally, it would be useful to examine the use of RP in a collaborative, problem-solving setting after training is complete and formal facilitators are no longer involved.

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## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix A INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT**

University of Tennessee  
“Interest based collaborative problem solving and reflective practice: A School district’s  
experience with collaborative conferencing”

### **INTRODUCTION**

You are invited to participate in a doctoral dissertation research study. The purpose of this study is to investigate participants’ experiences with collaborative conferencing.

The findings will help researchers and practitioners better understand the collaborative conferencing process. It will also inform local and state level stakeholders of the benefits and challenges with this new form of problem solving.

### **INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANT INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY**

Participation in this study is voluntary. By volunteering to participate in this study, you consent to having your interview audio taped, transcribed and used as a source of data. Volunteer participant interview audio tapes will be transcribed so that the researcher may look for themes that address her research questions. The tapes will be destroyed immediately after being transcribed.

### **RISKS**

There is *no inherent risk* to being involved in this study. All real names will be replaced with pseudonyms for purposes of transcribing audiotapes and reporting findings. Any other information that would reveal the participants’ identification will be removed from the data. Summaries of the dissertation resulting from this research will be shared with volunteer participants upon their request.

### **BENEFITS**

Results from this study will lead to a greater understanding of how participants perceive and experience collaborative conferencing. If volunteer participants wish to read the completed dissertation, they stand to gain a fuller perspective on their narratives of themselves as participants in collaborative conferencing, and insight into a collective group experience with collaborative conferencing.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

No identifying personal reference will be made in oral or written reports of this research that could link volunteer participants to this study. Only the researcher and

(Initials)\_\_\_\_\_

transcriptionist will know the actual names of volunteer participants. All identifying personal information will be removed from audiotapes. Volunteer participants' data, including audiotapes, consent forms, and transcripts will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office at 633 Greve Hall on the University of Tennessee, Knoxville campus. The person transcribing the audiotapes will be required to sign a confidentiality form. If others assist in analyzing a transcript, pseudonyms will replace actual names and any personal reference or reference to names of other people will be deleted from the transcript. All audiotapes that are transcribed will be destroyed immediately after transcriptions are completed. Consent forms and confidentiality forms will be stored for three years.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study), you may contact the researcher, Janel Seeley 821 Volunteer Blvd, 633 Greve Hall, Knoxville, TN 37996. jseeley1@utk.edu. 423-426-6619. If you have questions about your rights as a volunteer participant, contact University of Tennessee Research Compliance Services of the Office of Research at (865) 974-3466.

### **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data analysis is completed your data will be destroyed.

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### **CONSENT**

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



## **Vita**

**Janel Seeley** is currently an instructional designer and assistant lecturer for the Ellbogen Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Wyoming. Her current research interests include reflective practice, the scholarship of teaching and learning, collaborative conferencing, and interest-based problem solving. Some of this research led to her selection as an Emerging Engaged Scholar with the Engaged Scholarship Consortium. Janel is also a Community Fellow with the Institute for Collaborative Communication (CC) at the University of Tennessee. In this capacity, she has facilitated CC in various community agencies including the Department of Children's Services, Rule 31 Mediators, and school districts in Tennessee. In the past, she directed a program at East Tennessee State University in which she and colleagues trained employees for the Department of Children's Services. She also served as an education specialist at the Adult Education Academy at Morehead State University, and has taught as an adjunct faculty at Wilkes Community College and East TN State University. She holds a masters degree in Adult Education from Appalachian State University.